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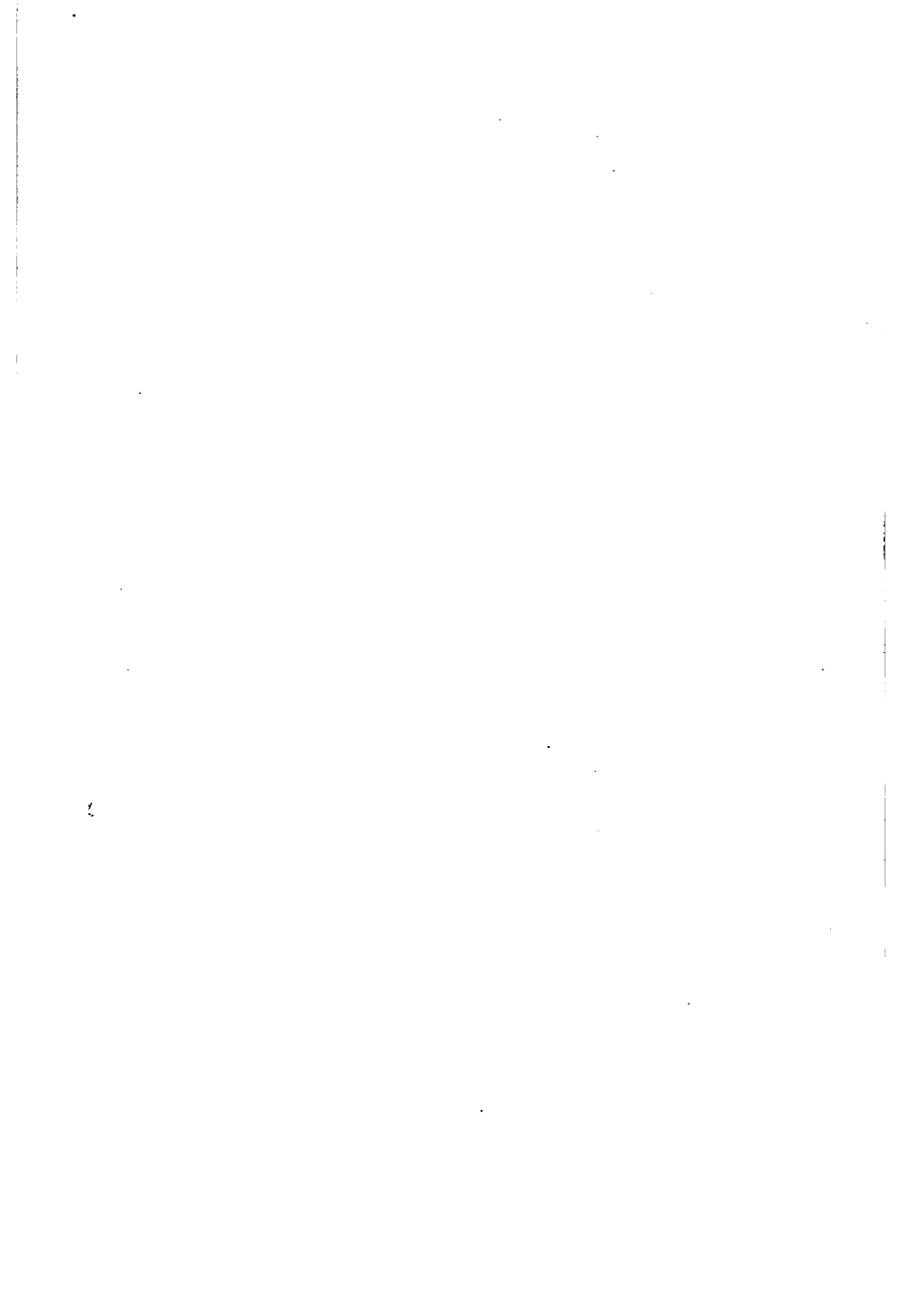
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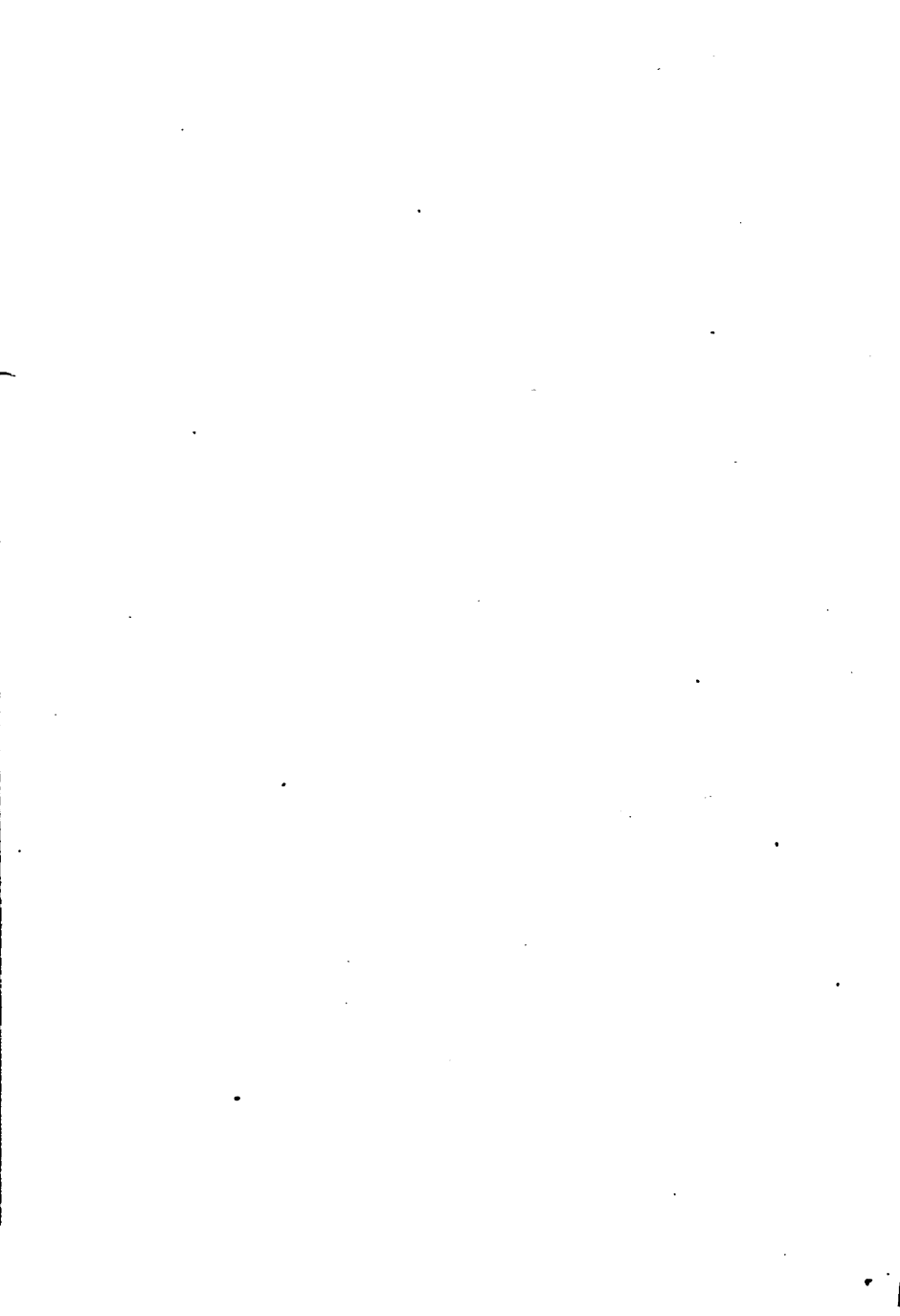
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VILLAGE LIFE IN THE FENS.



VILLAGE LIFE IN THE FENS,

OR

Old Age Pensions and "Back to the Land."

BY

FREDERIC J. GARDINER, F.R.HIST.S.

Author of the "History of Wisbech and Neighbourhood."



"With a Patch of Land and a Pension there are few who could not look forward to old age with equanimity, if not with pleasure."

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SPRECKELS

P R E F A C E.

This work is intended to illustrate the conditions of life existing in a Fen village and some of the causes which have led to rural depopulation, as well as to the consequent migration to larger centres of population. One eminent statesman is said to have suggested that a circus was required to add to the gaiety of village life, failing to realise that the aspirations of the toiling population are towards something better, that will secure their independence in old age, lessen the constant anxiety which is often felt lest the Workhouse should be the last refuge to which illness or family responsibilities might drive them. The question, at least, is not one of mere fleeting pleasures, such as a village fair or exhibition may give, but the desire to participate in the opportunities for acquiring reasonable home comforts and subsistence, as well as that knowledge and information often afforded by the Institutes and classes which are organised in our towns. Still more is there to be found the wish to possess the secure tenancy of some plot of land, upon which leisure time may be profitably spent. Such ambitions are deserving of encouragement, and the Small Holdings Act which has come into force, and the prospective Old Age Pension scheme are indications of the general desire to improve the condition

of those who live from hand to mouth. Such advantages would give assistance in discriminating between the thrifty and industrious toilers and those who are careless and indifferent. Hitherto, the best of the workers have been too often tempted to seek their fortunes in the larger towns, or to go abroad to seek their fortunes in distant lands, resulting in the survival of the fittest, but the disappointment of some. If village life be made more attractive, if men can have their allotment or small holding to cultivate, and possibly look forward to an old age pension, if misfortune prevent any provision for the helpless period of life, there is no reason why many should not be satisfied to remain at home. A happy and contented peasantry is a country's pride, and to make life more endurable and hopeful by just laws, calculated to improve the lot of the workers, would confer an inestimable benefit upon a sturdy, hard-working class of men, most of whom would greatly appreciate such advantages, and become increasingly contented and grateful subjects of our worthy King, Edward VII. His Majesty has done much upon his own estate at Sandringham and in that district by the erection of well-built cottages and club-rooms, as well as by the provision of allotments, to promote the happiness of his dependents and has set a noble example that is worthy of imitation in the desire to ameliorate the lives of the less fortunate in the battle of life. May not the familiar words of Longfellow's "Psalm of Life" be altered and adapted:—

Let us then be up and doing,
With a heart for labour's fate,
Still persisting, still pursuing,
Begin to act—nor longer wait!

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VILLAGE LIFE IN THE FENS.

CHAPTER I.

DREAMS OF AN OLD AGE PENSION.

"Sixty foive year auld to-day and no auld age 'lowance yet!" was the despondent exclamation of a prematurely decrepit man as he sat in his arm-chair in a barely furnished room, while the wintry wind whistled and rumbled outside, as though it would strip the very thatch from the roof of his frail cottage.

John Woodhouse was a son of the soil, and an agricultural labourer who, year in and year out, had toiled hard to bring up his family respectably and start them in the world. And now he had reached his sixty-fifth birthday, he and his wife, Mary Woodhouse, to whom the remark was addressed, bearing the traces of the hard life they had lived, battling with poverty, almost dragged under by illness in their family, but bravely struggling against adversity, their industry and sobriety enabling them so far to safely weather the storms of a life of not a little privation and self-denial. The sadness in the tone of the old man betokened despair rather than complaint, for the strain of life was beginning to tell upon him, and whilst his physical powers were declining, there was that ever-present prospect before him of his last days

being embittered by the absence of even the means of a bare existence. Though he had always rendered faithful and regular service to his employers, he knew too well that the day was coming when a younger and more active man would be preferred, and despite an honest and upright life, it seemed that there was nothing before his wife and himself but the Workhouse, or the stigma to a man who valued his independence as much as his freedom, of out-relief. This alas! was the "harbour of refuge" to which he and his wife, a devoted companion in all his struggles, must expect to reach. Mary, noticing his thoughtfulness and taciturnity as they sat, side by side, watching the dying embers of the half-filled stove, inquired,

'Waur makes yer look so sad, and this yer name-daa too, John?'

"Ah, Mary, thou mayst well aks that, for mony a time, lass, thou hast told me to trust our Father in Heav'n, but, aye, the future looks dark to-night," John replied.

"Well, now, you have trusted Him for ower fifty yare, are you going to begin to doot Him near the end of oor daas?'

"Naa, mother," said John, "but Heav'n helps those who help theirselves, and He's helped us up to noo, but auld age creeps on us, an' we're weary of a' this hard toil. How can we help oorsel's much longer?'

"True, John, but He who knoweth every hair of our head will not let us starve even though the world may know but little of our troubles."

For a moment, John sat thoughtfully watching the flickering sparks of a log that had fallen upon the hearth-stone,

"Ah," he said, "like a log of wood fall'n oot of the foire, we soon shall be put aside, save by the dear children whom God has giv'n us, who'll ha' to go through the same trouble if their life's spared. Oour Bob writes home fra New Zealand that in thar country there are auld age pensions for worn-oot workers who've moiled and toiled by

the sweat of their brow. But in the auld country there is no better end to an industr'us and strait life than that of starving and suffering, or burdening one's children who have thar own families, and the battle of life to fight!"

John brushed a tear from his eye as he thought of the dark, dismal future, for so it seemed to him that cold and dreary winter's night. Mary, always cheerful and hopeful, tried to talk of coming summer days, and the long bright evenings when they would sit outside the cottage door in the warm evening glow.

The old man, however, seemed not to hear her words, for as musingly he ran on with his thoughts, he said almost in a tone of reproach,

"Could na all tha mooney in our towns and cities provide rest houses or almshouses for us worn-out workers, who have ne'er been able to put ought by, so that in oor last daas we may have a shelter, not to laze about in ease, but wi just eno' to drive the wolf fra' the dour, even if they could do a little beside to help theirselves. My poor old dad lived and died a labourer on the farm, as 'onest a man as ever walked, and no laggard either, but if it had not been that I kept single and helped him and my good old mother till they died, they'd have had to av gone to the Work'us. But why should I be a burden on my children, who want all that they can earn for their little 'uns? I want my children to have a better chance than I had and they sha' try their look in the big towns or 'cross the seas where life is easier when old age comes and land is not nearly all in the hands of the well-to-do.

Mary, thinking it well on his birthday to cheer him up in another way, tactfully puts in a word.

"But, John, to pension us old folk—God knows tha' it would be a grand thing—would ocst a sight o' money you know, and people are saying now that the taxes are too heavy."

John, however, was ready with a reply, for in their village-meetings and in their talks with his fellow

labourers, old age pensions was one of the subjects that came uppermost, especially at election times.

"But aren't there some millions spent on parish relief and Work'uses which makes paupers on us without helping a falling man. My head is na long eno' to work it out, but if New Zealand can do it, why not ould England as well?"

"Well, John, if you had been one of those men that go to Parliament in the big city, I believe you would have given 'em some raal good notions about it. Why not write to yer member and tell him what yer think on 't?"

"Na, Mary, the like o' me they would neer listen to up there. If our meenister could put it down on paper, it might be read, but it would soon be forgotten, I reckon. Pensions, I have read, are sometimes given to them as has plenty, but we may work until life slips out of us and go to Him who will care for us howe'er u'mble oor lot."

Mary, still optimistic, once again plucks up courage to say—"So t'will allus be, John, if noone lifts a finger to make things better. I've learn'd at the village school, thank God for it, to write so that people can read it, and if you'll tell me what you've got to say, I'll try and write it to our M.P. for whom you gave your vote t'other day, and who says he will do what he can to help labouring men to put their needs before Parliament. Now I'm ready."

So with pen and ink, laboriously yet hopefully, the poor old couple over whom the veil of life was creeping, struggled with their brains and pen to convey, in rural dialect and untutored language, the intensely real sentiments welling up from the depths of their hearts. It was a pathetic letter, blotted with tears, as they entered into the keen sufferings of the men and women of their own class, who were past work, decrepit, crippled by accident, infirm, ailing, diseased, the army of wounded in the battle of life, whose privations touched the pity

of their Saviour, the Rest-giver to the weary and heavy-laden. It was no scholarly epistle of fine phrasing. Far from it. Abrupt, incoherent, involved, smeared and blurred it might be, yet when once the illegible and illiterate scrawl had been deciphered, there was underlying its crude wording and lack of punctuation, the intensity of feeling that desired to describe a wrong and to find a way of putting it right. It was the appealing of a pair of genuine hearts eager to better the lot of their fellowmen and to point out for them, as well as for themselves, the means of so modifying the penalties of the declining years of life, that old age might be a period of thankfulness and happiness rather than prolonged suffering and privation, from which death was too often regarded as, to quote an oft-used expression, a "happy release!"

Carefully the letter was sealed, and directed, a piece of gummed paper being placed across the flap, in order that so important a missive should not be the prey of the too curious, through whose hands it might pass before it reached the great city of which they had heard so much, but never seen by them. When the village postman came, the letter was handed to him with a shyness and awkwardness that betokened a communication of an unusual kind.

The postman, who glanced at the direction on the envelope, chaffingly remarked—

"Been writing to the hupper classes, John. Hope you've not forgotten to ask for pensions for us poor rural postmen. We shall want 'em bad enough when we git a bit older, yer know."

John flushed as though startled by the apposite remark of the postman, and, for a moment, he felt as if their thoughts had been read, but, assuming as much unconcern as he could, he replied—

"You servants of the King have more chances of pensions in their auld age than we labouring men, who have to end our lives in the Workhus, though we have

toiled 'onestly and kept o'orselves respectable-like. How-o'er, I'm sadly afraid we shall both on us want a lift up in our auld age. But mind ye, all is not gold that glitters and you know what we sometimes say—"Blessed are them which expect little, 'cos they will not get disappointed!" And John turned away, with a grim guffaw at the despairing note of his joke.

"All right, old friend, it's no concern of mine about yer private letter," laughingly replied the postman, "but when I saw 'M.P.' on the outside, it made me think of what those men who go to Parliament promise at the election and what happens afterwards, which does not allus satisfy me. But Rome, as they say, waren't built in a day, I s'pose."

With a suggestive shrug of the shoulders, the postman slipped the letter into his bag, and drove away, speculating as he traversed the familiar road, what John could want to write to the M.P. for. When he turned the letter over and saw the piece of gummed paper across the flap, that made him more curious than ever. What harm, he thought, would there be, if he kept it back that night, and posted it the next day? John or his wife would never know, and what they wrote about to so important a man as the county member, he was very anxious to find out. So he slipped the letter into his pocket, intending to open it when he reached his own home.

But John and Mary were wondering whether anything would result from their evening's labours. For fifty years John had worked on Sir William Greenwood's estate, at Eagle Hall, and now that he was getting old and infirm, he was living in fear that he would be discharged to make room for a younger and more active man. John had always borne an excellent character, was a regular attendant at the Methodist Chapel and, as a local preacher, was wont to tell his fellow-men of the love of Jesus, Himself a worker, and the son of a carpenter, bore to those who served him by honest toil. But his

employer, Sir Cyril Greenwood, had no sympathy with those Dissenters in his village and as an upholder of the Church of a somewhat narrow type, that is now happily giving place to a greater charity, he viewed John with a suspicion that he might be disseminating mischief among the villagers. At election times, when pressure was put upon him to vote against his convictions, John firmly declined, and consequently, now that old age had begun to come upon him, he could not be sure of ever retaining the ill-repaired cottage in which he and his forbears had lived so long. He had one son and a daughter living out of six, four of whom had died, and his son, finding that there was no better prospect for the declining years of life than that which awaited his father and mother, determined to emigrate, in the hope that he might be able to send home something to help them to make life bearable beyond the pittance of relief the Poor Law afforded. He had written from New Zealand of the old age pensions for those who were sixty-five, reaching a maximum of ten shillings per week, and John Woodhouse had been brooding over this letter and comparing England with her Colonies, when his sixty-fifth birthday caused him to give expression to his gloomy forecast of the future.

CHAPTER II.

MR. WILLIAM DENTON, M.P., AND THE NEW
PARLIAMENT.

The London season had commenced. Parliament was assembling after the General Election, which had just been held, and the new Government, through the medium of the King's Speech, had promised to endeavour to deal with the question of Old Age Pensions. The proposals of the Cabinet were eagerly anticipated in the Press, and at political and social gatherings, the probabilities of so far-reaching a measure were discussed with more animation than most political issues. The country, during the election, had pronounced, with a sufficient emphasis, in favour of a measure that would seek to free a larger proportion of the population from that wearing and fretting anxiety which so often brings the victims of poverty down to the level of the submerged tenth. In London social assemblies, where politicians foregather, much diversity of opinion arose upon the principles to be adopted in formulating the extent of its benefits, and the universality or otherwise of its application, and whilst some declared the financial impracticability of an equitable scheme, others grew impatient that an initial experiment should be attempted, on cautious lines, in order to gain such experience as might, perchance, justify further developments. For must it not be for the public weal, they almost passionately argued, that as large a pro-

portion of the population as possible should be relieved of the despair and hopelessness of grinding poverty in their journey down the hill of life?

On a sunny afternoon in the late spring, when the trees were bursting into new life in a London square, the Member of Parliament, recently returned to represent the political interests of Extenshire in the House of Commons, was sitting in the study of his own London residence, when one of his most earnest constituents and supporters was ushered by the footman into the room. Mr. William Denton, the newly elected M.P., rose from his desk, to welcome his friend, Herbert Wright, and they were soon reviving some of the experiences of the recent election. Inviting his friend to join his family in the drawing-room, the conversation quickly turned upon the topic of the hour, the practicability of devising a scheme to relieve their poorer neighbours, without unduly burdening the country with increased taxation.

Mr. Denton approached the question somewhat diplomatically, for although he had pledged himself to support a reasonable scheme, he was already beginning to realise that politicians of acknowledged acumen and administrative ability sometimes found it difficult to fulfil their pledges. So that in skilfully guarded phrase he remarked—

“It seems to me a very sad reflection that only three out of every ten persons in this country live a life of comparative freedom from that anxiety and worry that lowers the vitality and ultimately causes the premature death of so many of our fellow-men. That estimate is based upon calculations made by an eminent statistician. But the question of devising a remedy is a large one, and where so many have to be provided with some means of subsistence in old age, the Government must necessarily advance with cautious steps in a matter bristling with difficulties.”

Herbert Wright could not help noticing the difference between his utterances during the election, so confident

then of being able to overcome all obstacles, but now, with statesmanlike obscurantism, preparing the way for a modification of those rose-coloured anticipations.

"That may be quite true," said his visitor, "but as a member of public boards in your constituency, Mr. Denton, I am continually reminded that out of something like nine millions which the Poor Law provides to relieve the necessitous, not less than five millions are responsible for old age pauperism."

Mrs. Denton, who had helped her husband in the election campaign, and had, as a consequence, realised the struggles of the poor, and the poverty of the homes she had visited, interposed with a plea for the toiler by remarking that in her experience a large number of cases of destitution were due to insufficient nutrition, illness, and other causes which were not easily preventable. There were John and Mary Woodhouse, for instance, who had worked hard to bring up their family respectably and start them as comfortably in life as their means allowed. But they were now almost past working and might soon be wholly dependent upon their children and their parish for their subsistence. The son in New Zealand could not be compelled by the Guardians to contribute to his parents' support, although children were often compelled to do so when their own families needed all that could be spared, and the older generation were made to impoverish the members of the succeeding one. Having paid their way until their physical strength failed, surely they deserved better of their country than to receive the same reward as the idle and dissolute, who perforce become paupers because of their unworthy life.

"That is true," rejoined Mr. Denton, "but there is, as you know, the possibility that the knowledge that old age pensions would be obtainable would tend to encourage improvidence and selfishness in some. If it proved an encouragement to recklessness and idleness, they might become, to some extent, a social curse. To avoid such a

possibility limitations must be placed upon their bestowal, or possibly even their retention."

At this point of the discussion, George, the eighteen year old son, who was still pursuing his studies, chimed in as he looked up from his books. With a prudent eye to the future of his career, he asked,

"And why should old age pensions be restricted to the necessitous poor? If I, for instance, in the future, comply with the required conditions, I ought to be entitled, when I am old enough to share the same privilege."

"Well done, Mr. George," said Mr. Herbert Wright, warmly endorsing the youth's timely contribution to the conversation, "I think so too, for if no possible taint of pauperism is to attach to these pensions, they must be open to all classes. The respectability and universality of these pensions would be a valuable factor in the family life of a large part of the population, and tend not only to the raising of the standard of life but stimulate personal efforts towards increasing the grant made."

Mr. Denton listened with keen interest to the arguments advanced, with which he felt some sympathy, though his financial experience made him remark that a scheme so comprehensive and covering so wide an area involved great monetary responsibilities that would have to be met from a special levy or increased tax.

At this moment his daughter Gladys entered, a flax-haired girl with well-cut features and a bright, cheerful expression upon her face that made her regarded as the light of the household. She was an only daughter, had been carefully trained and educated, and had just returned from a foreign school, to which she had been sent to acquire the French and German languages. Wishing her to possess an intelligent interest in the current topics of the day, her father turned to her and said,

"What do you think, Gladys, about the nation bestowing old age pensions upon those who are past work? Do you think it practicable or not?"

Gladys looked serious for a moment or two as she

weighed the matter so far as her small experience of political problems permitted; and then replied,

"Well, father dear, so young a girl can scarcely be expected to give, at a moment's notice, an adequate reply, but when hearing the matter discussed, I have thought that, as it would be very costly to provide an old age pension for all persons over a given age, why should not the experiment be made upon the older women first. They are frequently less able, in advanced age, to earn their living; they have often suffered the burden and heat of the day, and by the provision of an old age pension there would be a large saving in the amount of out-relief which would help to meet the cost."

Mr. Denton, pleased with the thoughtful answer and excellent suggestion, said it was one well worthy of consideration. In fact, he thought there were reasons why women should receive some preferential consideration in embarking upon such a scheme.

Gladys blushed somewhat when her father praised her for her proposal, and Mr. Herbert Wright could not help admiring the fair girl who had answered her father's question so sensibly. But he did not know that she had been discussing the matter with the son of a wealthy neighbour in the country, at Oatlands, Cyril Greenwood, who had been taking every opportunity of meeting her since she had returned from the Continent. He was a jovial and open-hearted youth, whose society she enjoyed, though she felt that he was wild and almost reckless in his habits. Indeed, his love of pleasure, his frequenting of the racecourse, and gambling propensities often made her feel very sad, for she saw before her the possibility of an unhappy future if she encouraged his attentions. Light-hearted as she was, these anticipations of the difficulties of life had made her more thoughtful than most girls of her age, and when she spoke of the troubles and anxieties of women, possibly she may have even wondered whether it would be her lot to be thrown upon the tender mercies of the world, a victim, like many others, of the

extravagance and recklessness which end in the necessity to appeal to the aid of the charitable. However, her gloomy forecast of the future was scarcely noticed by her father, who turning to Mr. Herbert Wright, remarked,

"My duties call me now to the House, where an important division is expected, if a three-line whip means anything. Mr. Wright and I will walk over to the House and find out how the debate is going."

Through Westminster Hall, with its eight centuries of historical associations, its Coronations, its State trials, its lying in state of one of the Empire's greatest statesmen, its banquets to Colonial and foreign guests, they passed between its silent statues, up the broad steps and into the lobbies filled with members excitedly discussing the remarkable statement made by a prominent member, whose pledges upon the subject of pensions were thought to be beyond question or doubt. But now he had asserted, in the course of a debate, that in the whole course of his political life, he had never given any promise to initiate an old age pension scheme. Mr. Denton, however, recalled having read the statement in a certain debate reported in the daily papers, and turning to Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, found the speech made by the member in question. Pointing it out to Mr. Wright, he remarked "If that is not an actual promise it certainly gives an assurance that has not been fulfilled. I am wondering who will assume the responsibility of pioneering such a proposal through Parliament when the time comes for its serious discussion. But that is not yet, for this arises out of the King's Speech and much will depend upon the surplus at the disposal of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Have you read Mr. Charles Booth's book on "Old Age Pensions and the Aged Poor?" It is a very clear statement of the whole position and his valuable statistics justify a serious consideration of this problem."

Mr. Wright was obliged to admit that he was not fond of too many figures and observed that the necessary calcu-

lations of one's daily life were as much as he could find time to effectually grasp.

Mr. Denton proceeded in a few words to outline the general idea of the book, pointing out that Mr. Booth takes seventy as the basis of his scheme, though sixty-five is the age at which pauperism increases by leaps and bounds. But at seventy he argues that everyone should be entitled to a pension of seven shillings per week, which if sixty-five were decided upon, would have to be reduced to four shillings per week. Concurrently with the establishment of old age pensions out-door relief would be in these cases abolished. The cost of such a pension would be about nineteen millions—a large amount one may say—but fifteen per cent. of the wealthier population would not care to establish their claim and this would reduce the amount to sixteen millions, which would give an old age pension to every man and woman in England, Wales, Scotland or Ireland. The saving in out-door relief and the reorganisation of the workhouse system would mean a further reduction, and if the women were dealt with first, as their claim as the strongest, seven to seven and a half millions would suffice, leaving eight or nine millions to be provided later for the men. Ten millions from the Chancellor of Exchequer's surplus, assisted by increased taxation would do it.

Mr. Wright had become intensely interested in this condensed epitome, which he could grasp without the mental effort of following it in elaborate detail and he excitedly exclaimed "Ten millions only. I see it. Why the Chancellor of the Exchequer could devote two or three millions to it, and if it succeeded, add more to it in subsequent years."

Mr. Denton: "Precisely. In case of war or of national danger, taxes would soon be found to yield such a sum and there is no way in which the millions would contribute so greatly to the welfare and happiness of the people. How much have our wars in recent years cost? Enough to have given a pension to all who needed it over

and over again. What about our agricultural labourers, the people who have migrated from the country, sometimes to starve in London, the workers who year after year struggle against grinding poverty?"

Mr. Wright: "Now, Mr. Denton, you grow quite enthusiastic over your pet scheme. You represent an agricultural constituency, where many an illustration could be given of the need of such pensions. Why should you not bring this matter before the House of Commons with the same perspicuity that you have done to-day in commending its advantages to my judgment?"

Mr. Denton smiled at the warmth of his friend which had developed so quickly, and remarked: "No, Mr. Wright, it needs a more experienced and more influential man than I to accomplish such a task, but you may rely upon me that having seen something of the hardships which the poor suffer, I will do my best to keep the matter *en evidence*, so that it may at some time assume a definite shape. But Parliament moves very slowly in these matters, and then there is the House of Lords.

Mr. Wright: Well, even the Peers do not themselves refuse pensions when they are awarded them, but it would be a noble act if the wealthier members were to sacrifice their claims in favour of their poorer neighbours. At any rate, they could scarcely veto a financial measure such as this would be."

Mr. Denton shook his head thoughtfully as he parted with his friend, remarking: "Well, we shall see. All things come to those who wait!" And as he walked home the Member for Extonshire thought of his friend's question—Why should you not bring the Old Age Pensions problem before the House? His Parliamentary life might be of some practical use, if he could only make less hard the lot of the poor, who had no better refuge than the Workhouse, however well it might be administered. And he resolved that he would, at least do what was possible.

CHAPTER III.

THE STATUTE HIRING FAIR AT EASTGATE.

John Woodhouse had been for thirty years on Sir William Greenwood's estate. Never a word had been heard against his character or industry. He was one of the old faithful servants with a willingness to do whatever he was asked without demur. His life had been one round of honest toil. He was brought up, after leaving school early, with a scanty education, as a farmer's boy and paid small wages for bird-scaring. Subsequently he learned to plough and helped to attend to the horses. He and his brothers and sisters lived in an old thatched house, four beds huddled together, with slight boarded partitions, like pigs in a sty, with but little regard to decency or health. Here is his own story:

I was married when I was twenty-one. Perhaps it was young, but my father did not want me at home and thought I was old enough to look out for myself. Fifteen shillings a week was not much to keep a wife, who was often ailing and to provide for a young family. My hours were from five in the morning to six at night and sometimes longer in summer. For twenty years I had no new Sunday suit to go to a place of worship. I had no allotment or garden to cultivate. If I had been a good scholar, I should have been better off in life. Young men and young women get better wages and less hours in the towns, that is why they leave

the villages. I have known men work until they were eighty and earn at that age only a shilling a day, just to keep themselves out of the workhouse. Very few workers on the land can save enough to keep themselves in their last years. When the farm was sold, the agent of the new owner put my cottage rent up £2 a year, which is a heavy blow in my old age. I had lived in the house thirty years and did not want to leave it, so had to work on, disheartened though I was, for I could not get it altered back.

For sixty years, John Woodhouse had worked unceasingly with practically no holidays and little spare time for his own occupations. Beyond the weekly papers he had little time for reading, and as he faces old age he is, to all intents and purposes, penniless. Nothing remains for him and his hard-working careful wife, who had been his faithful helpmeet; but to enter the Workhouse, where his children, though with families of their own, may have to squeeze something out of their earnings, and meet a like fate in their turn. He had seen the depopulation of his own village and of others around him, caused by the young and active men, who ought to have been the backbone of agricultural development, migrating to the large towns in search of more remunerative employment or emigrating to Canada and New Zealand in the hope of finding greater opportunities for themselves and those who were dependent upon their exertions. A bare pittance of fifteen shillings per week, with a sickly wife and a young family, even though harvest money be added, was little enough, and worst of all gave no prospect of providing for old age the means to keep the toilers out of the Workhouse. Why do these men leave their homes in a pretty village, where they breathe pure air and live among the beauties of God's world to spend their days in a vile slum of a crowded city, going hungry to bed in a crowded alley, less healthy than the cattle-shed of a village homestead? Is it right that these lives of toil should have no better end than

the barrack system by which the aged poor are often the associates of those whom they have avowed, in order to maintain an upright and honest character? Is it any wonder the sons refuse to follow in their fathers' steps? Poor homes, insufficient pay to provide for the future, few pleasures and books, no piece of land to cultivate for themselves and perhaps not even a piece of garden. Hence they forsake the village and face the risks of the city rather than live a life of which they know there is but one sad depressing ending. But are there no remedies that would attract the younger men back to the land or retain them so that the scarcity of labour might be supplied? The provision of land at a fair and reasonable rent, would probably enable intelligent men to climb the ladder of life to a moderate competency and provision for old age, while to those unable to do this, the reward of an honest life of toil should surely be a pension that would keep the wolf from the door and retain a home, however humble, above the wearied heads of the aged occupiers. The extension of the almshouse system as Homes for the Aged would surely follow an Old Age Pension scheme.

John and Mary Woodhouse had one daughter living at home with them, who had been named Rose, after the beautiful blooms that luxuriated in the sun and country air surrounding their humble dwelling. Rose was a fresh complexioned country maid, who had been out to service in a London residence, but had returned to look after her parents' comfort and happiness, for the privations of life were beginning to tell upon them. Rose had been up with the dawn and had anticipated the wants of her parents so that she might be ready to start early to Eastgate, the neighbouring town, whither she was to be accompanied by Giles Day, who had "kept company with her"—as their courting was described—for eighteen months. The distance was long and the carrier's cart was to convey them to Eastgate. Giles soon found a sheltered corner in it for Rose, and seating himself next

to her, they could more easily observe than be observed, as the country folk stowed themselves away in the limited space and exceedingly rickety van. Rose's prospect of a "day out" was, however beclouded by wondering where Giles would find employment during the coming year, for he was looking out for a fresh situation. As the cart jolted along the uneven road, Rose whispered to her swain,

"I wonder, Giles, where you will let yerself to-day. Somewhere near to our home, I hope."

Giles' thought were naturally upon the same question as he said "Ah, Rose, I'm hoping that I may be near to you, and p'raps it may not be long before I can earn eno' to make a home for my little lassie. But there's nae much chance o' bettering oneself in this country, and when there is ne'er a piece of land to get, or a few acres to work upon oursels, one despairs almost of making a home with a scrap of comfort. Some of my mates hae gone to the big cities where there are better chances, it may be, of getting more money, and improving one's schooling than here, where there's scarce a reading room or anything better than the 'pub' parlour."

Rose sighed as she thought of having to leave her parents in their enfeebled years, and replied "Well, Giles, we must hope things will be better soon. There is talk in the village about allotments, or letting men have a few acres, and if that should come true, we could then hope to be happy in the country still with our own friends about us."

Giles observed her unwillingness to go back to London, where she had seen something of domestic service already, and said "That is true, Rose, but things move very slowly and while we are waiting for them allotments, or small holdings, as they call them, we may, like our fathers and mothers, grow old with no prospect better than the Poorhouse. If God shall give me health and strength, I mean to try and do better than that."

By this time, the carrier's cart had stopped and was

depositing its human load. Giles helped Rose out, and they were soon mixing in the crowds that were thus early thronging the streets—for it was Statute-day in Eastgate, a thriving country town in the centre of a fruit and flower-growing, as well as agricultural district. This annual hiring fair was held just when chill October had already given a crispness to the air and when bright hued leaves scattered on the ground betokened the fall of the year, with its rich warm tints of autumn impressed upon the face of nature. The labourers who tilled the fields were nearing the climax of the year's labours, for the harvest had been gathered in and the bright golden sheaves of corn were piled into the homestead stacks which were filling the farmyards with a rich promise of winter food. To-day was the great Michaelmas hiring fair of the year, called the Statute Fair, because appointed by an Act of Parliament, and its actual date annually fixed by the County Justices. So that the fields and stockyards were deserted, and all but necessary work was put aside, in order to make an early start for Eastgate. And merry parties they were which passed along the roads, some in carriers' carts, drawn by horses decorated with bright ribbons, some in their masters' vehicles driven by the foreman or horsemen, while not a few rollicking lads and lassies tramped the roads, light-heartedly speculating on their destiny during the coming year and what value they were going to place upon their handiwork. The character of these fairs has, necessarily undergone some change, as the result of changed ideas, improved communications and greater facilities in travelling. In years gone past, domestic servants, as well as farm hands, gathered "on the stones," which meant that they collected in the streets, paved with cobble-stones, sometimes scoffingly called "petrified kidneys." Here, in the open thoroughfares, almost blocking the traffic, which moved with difficulty through the crowd, the employers sought amongst the men waiting to be hired, and picked out the most suitable men for garden or field work, or

to attend to the horses and farm stock. But the day has gone past, when in the more primitive times, the mistresses, who had ridden to the fair on the pillions behind their yeomen husbands, catechised under the public eye, the cooks, general maid of all works, or dairymaids, discussing the conditions of service with as much indifference to those around them as they could assume. This barbarism has now happily ceased and the rustic lasses, fresh and ruddy in colour, bearing the impress of health-giving country air upon their faces, are no longer ranged in rows, like a South American slave market of the past, to undergo the degrading process of open air bargaining. The greater privacy of assembly-rooms or register offices are now sought, while the bi-weekly newspapers give publicity to the respective wants of mistress or maid.

"My evening out"—some Sunday liberty, and a holiday at this or that time, are privileges that are sought, and first one innovation and then another creep in, until the confidence and trust of former days seems to have undergone a considerable limitation. Though the methods of hiring domestic servants have been modernised and improved, the selection of yearly farm servants or fruit-farming men remains substantially the same. The large open Market-place—picturesque with stalls and garish shows, for it is a pleasure as well as a hiring fair—has its roadways and approaches crowded with rustics, who congregate opposite the principal hostel of Eastgate in such numbers that it would be difficult to wedge a way through at noon. The burly farmers are there, and one country labourer, with ungainly gait and floating gay ribbons in his cap, might be thought to have taken the King's shilling, and enlisted in the Army. Another with an astoundingly bright neckerchief, loosely tied, and a jovial good tempered face, typifies the old time rustic, ready to stand by his master, through bad as well as good times, when crops fail and stock brings low prices, as well as when prospects are bright and profit-earning. Fourteen to fifteen shillings a week, cottage and garden

rented, so much harvest money, wife to look after poultry, or help in the dairy, all the details are settled, and sometimes, if it be more than a year's contract, put down in writing and witnessed. If it be a single man, who is to live indoors, looking after the horses or stock, a paper, which is read over to him amid the noise and bustle of the fair, or in the neighbouring hotel, is signed, and his lot is settled for the next twelve months. Before parting, however, the following colloquy takes place:

"B'aint yer going to gie me a h-earnest, maaster?" says Giles,

"Earnest, Giles" replies the farmer, "Why I thought those days were gone by. I used to give such things years ago, but when the yardman I hired sent it back to me, and said he wouldn't come to do the work—well, I said to myself—no more earnest, if that is all they're worth!"

But Giles was not to be put off and rubbing his chin as if trying to find words to reply, he said with a broadening smile,

"Come, maaster, yer not going to blaam me for whar thar other country Johnnie did? I'm ne'er so bad as that."

So the farmer rather than lose a promising servant, whose honesty and candour rather pleased him, thrust his hand into his pocket, from which hung an old-fashioned fob chain and seals, drawing out a florin, and slipping it into the man's weather-stained hand, at the same time giving this advice—

"Now, don't you spend that siller in the public, but keep some o' it, for may be you'll want it when a pinch comes in the long winter days."

"All right, maaster," said Giles, as he thrust his coin in his pocket, after having spat upon it for luck with that lingering superstition which ignorance believes such a repulsive action will ensure. Bidding his master "Good day" with the assurance that he would put in his appear-

ance on Michaelmas-day, Giles sidled away and was soon lost in the fair.

The farmer looked after his "hireling" with a half-amused air, as he watched him hail a smartly dressed country lass who had evidently been a distant spectator of an interview concerning which she evidently felt no little anxiety. The hearty manner in which she grasped his hand, when she found that her "young man" with whom she "walked out" had secured a situation nearer to her home, indicated the relationship between the couple was what is known in village parlance, as "sweet-hearting."

Farmer Langley, for it was he who had hired Giles, lived in the neighbouring village of Sandworth, and had seen many vicissitudes in the years that he had wrestled with the soil, seeking to obtain from it a moderate competency upon which he might retire in his declining years. But his family needed all he could earn, and there seemed but little chance of an old age pension—despite the promises made at General Elections—unless he could manage to provide one for himself, if health were spared to him until his family were off his hands. He heard the tales of privation and poverty when he attended the meetings of the Board of Guardians at Eastgate, and even wondered whether it might be his unhappy fate, if crops failed or stock died, to be compelled to seek the shelter of such a refuge. He was not a hard hearted man, by any means, but whilst his sympathies were drawn out by the piteous stories of his poorer neighbours whom he knew had bravely struggled with adversity, and had at last unhappily fallen in the fight for existence, yet, on the other hand, he also knew that there were many who could not afford to pay increased rates lest they also should be drawn into the great vortex of poverty. So that while some of his fellow Guardians seemed to bear hardly upon the needy, he put in a word, where he was able to do so, for the broken down toiler made destitute in the evening of life by failure and misfortune or the

heavy hand of illness. Yet he set his face against the professional vagabond, who spurned work and preferred tramping his way to the next ward for a night's shelter, rather than earn his living by the sweat of his brow. Farmer Langley, as he drove home from Eastgate Statute, wondered how his crops would turn out this harvest, and whether his efforts to secure a surplus, after meeting his liabilities, would be rewarded with success.

In the meantime, Giles had no such anxieties. Carried away by the rollicking fun of a pleasure fair, he and Rose Woodhouse soon forgot everything but the diversions of the moment.

In former days, the bazaars or stalls on the Market-place of Eastgate were laden with showy and cheap ornaments which adorned the cottage homes on their return home from one of those rare visits to the country town. Now the gay bazaars, tricked out with glittering and gaudily decorated trinkets, had given place to the satisfying of the cravings of the appetites of village folk in the shape of oysters, welks, stewed pears, Grantham gingerbread, or the brightly coloured lengths of almond rock so attractive to the merry little folk. Then, too, the old fashioned "whirligigs" pushed round by boys and girls, who were rewarded with an occasional ride for their efforts, have been superseded by elaborately constructed mechanical roundabouts, gorgeously bedecked with shining mirrors in gilded frames, and furnished with electrical motors, realistic steeds, or switchback chariots which unmistakably attract crowds of admirers and patrons. Brilliantly illuminated at night by electric light and driven by the same fleet little engine that generates the light, the sleepy town was fairly aroused from its lethargic condition by the noise and glare that came from the excited crowd. The fascinating cinematograph and lime-light exhibitions, the thought-reading demonstrations, in imitation of the Zancigs telepathic séances, conducted by a showman of ebony skin and commanding stature, are among the modern innovations, whilst most novel of all,

the Alpine glissades, like a modern lighthouse among the moving swirl of humanity below, from the top of which erection, shrieking girls and boys, on mats, tobogganning down the sloping way, until the ground be reached and the top again climbed by the slower process of mounting the steps. Amidst the perpetual din of three or four mechanical organs, droning out a strange and discordant medley of popular airs, the frequenters of the fair seem to find a bewilderment which contrasts with the monotony of village life. There are few bright spots in the lives of some of the toilers and the pleasures of the Statute fair are by no means despised.

There is, however, often a sorrowful ending to these times of revelry, and Giles, when rain began to fall sought shelter with Rose in the Green Dragon Inn. The public room was hot and stifling and an acquaintance, whom he met there, inviting him to take a glass with him, Giles soon became noisy and quarrelsome, although in his sober moments, no-one was more inclined to be friendly than he was. Rose anxiously watched the change in his demeanour, and realising the danger of his remaining, persuaded him to leave with her, and with difficulty, half dragged, half supported him to the carrier's cart which was soon to start homeward. It was a sad ending to the day, for Rose felt that if she had not been there, Giles might have found himself in the hands of the police before the morning. Giles fell into a heavy sleep, as the covered van jolted over the roads, and Rose was left alone to her thoughts. Some of her fellow-travellers, seeing her troubled looks, spoke kindly to her, whilst others jeered and laughed at the helpless youth, until Rose felt inclined to wish that she had not remained at the fair so late in the day.

Giles, when he woke next morning, made a resolve, that never again would he place himself in the way of a temptation so likely to be fatal to his future prospects, as well as distressing and humiliating to Rose, who was far too sensible to condone his fault.

"Look ere, Giles," he said, "if we are to be married, we shall have no money to fritter away like this, and the sooner we understand each other the better."

"All right, Rose, I am right down ashamed o' myse'f, and we'll have no more of it," said Giles, but I wish that not only at Eastgate, but in the village, too, there were places where a man could sit and play games or talk to his friends where there is no temptation to get into trouble. A bright fire, some papers and books, with other helps to a steady life, especially o' winter nights, t' would make both villages and towns happier, brighter and better."

To which Rose replied with a cordial approval and adding, with a sigh, "What a difference it would make to our lives in the country! I wish that it could be done."

CHAPTER IV.

VILLAGE LIFE AT OATLANDS.

John and Mary Woodhouse had lived long enough in Oatlands to see many changes and some of them changes for the worse. For fifty years John had been employed in tilling the fruitful soil and proving the truth of the promise that harvest should follow upon seed time. And he felt that though the growers complained of the low prices of corn, he often thanked God that the price of bread was very different to what it was when he was a boy, and often had little enough to eat because food was so dear.

It was a quaint, dull and dreamy place, old-fashioned, moving slowly and lazily along in its dull prosaic round of duties. A canal, flanked with reed beds and bulrushes, among which water-hens built their nests and fish made their hiding-places, flowed through the centre of the village, whilst on its glassy surface, lighters laden with produce, coal or gravel, were punted along or drawn by horses from the towpath alongside. On either side, in the most irregular fashion stood the quaintest and oddest jumble of cottages, with thatched roofs, which kept their inmates snug and warm in winter and cool in summer, while oak beams and latticed windows betrayed their ancient origin. These old dwellings jutted out, shrunk back or even leaned against one another as if they were on friendly terms and were trying to hold one another

up as long as possible. Intruding among these antiquated, but, nevertheless, picturesque cottages, overgrown with climbers and blooming plants, were some modern red-bricked and box-like houses built for use rather than for ornament, and with little regard for any other consideration than cheapness. Towering above the dwellings was the fine old church, with spire pointing the people upwards and lifting up their thoughts from the level expanse surrounding them to the higher ambitions of life. The edifice was the pride of the village, built centuries ago, when workmen vied with one another in beautifying the sacred buildings that were erected with so much skill under the direction of the monks of the neighbouring monasteries. Each period, with its distinctive features, told its own story and archaeologists compiled from its walls and arches, "sermons in stones," which spoke of the vicissitudes of past generations, and their floods, fires or destructive periods. One could not help wondering if such spacious buildings could ever have been filled with worshippers, for in these Fen villages, many of these churches seem to be all but empty and on Sundays the clergyman's voice may often be heard echoing among the pillars to the small, scattered flock to whom his exhortations are addressed.

In Oatlands there were two Nonconformist chapels, one a Methodist and the other belonging to the Baptist denomination. Into both these, on Sunday, the villagers crowded into some bright and hearty service, greeting one another as they met around the entrance. It is not easy to realise how dependent these hard working men and women in the Fen villages often are upon the inspiration in their lives flowing from the village chapel. Year after year, the fervour and enthusiasm of laymen who have ministered to them—perhaps some humble but earnest artisan from the neighbouring town—have made these Bethels their only centres of light, illuminating their monotonous and uneventful surroundings and furnishing them with a stimulus that compensate for other drawbacks in their somewhat dull and prosaic round of existence.

Those who have observed the influence of Church and Dissent in our towns and villages will have probably arrived at the conclusion that the Church of England holds its position by reason of its past history, its prestige, as well as its authorised liturgy and the influence of an endowed clergy. The Church clergy, Vicar and Curate, have neither of them, as a rule, any great gift for preaching and they would be quite unfamiliar with the extemporised devotions of the Nonconformists. There are, of course, eloquent preachers and great scholars in the Church, but many a clergyman has reached high preferment without being able to make that intellectual and eloquent appeal which are characteristic of some of the best types of Nonconformist divines. The brief manuscript essays, which are often denominated sermons, and read with little pretensions to delivery, would scarcely satisfy the congregations who estimate, in a large degree, the power of the ministrations under which they sit, by the intensity and directness of the appeal to accept the free invitations of the Gospel. It is often said that when a rector is an indifferent preacher, the curate is counted still worse, but if he should develop unsuspected gifts he is liable to be regarded as ambitious and pretending. A fairly good choir and organ, a somewhat ornate and advanced ceremonial, and an appeal to the traditions of the Church and to the Sacraments as the means of grace, remove much of the responsibility from the priest, who satisfies the requirements of his position, if he be genial and courteous, with sufficient scholarship to obtain a degree, and an irreproachable pedigree and character.

The atmosphere of the Nonconformist chapels is characterised by less formalism and a greater freedom of action, which hold the greater attention of the congregation. The men of the congregation are, unlike those of the Church, about equal in number to the women, and very often outnumber them. The minister and congregation may be said to be largely inter-dependent, and in

a measure, stand and fall together. So that their relations are mutual and personal. Some have thought such a position to be intolerable and expressions of pity have been heard for the minister who is dependent upon the support of deacons, chapel committees and congregations. But it may be argued that a Curate has often as much to endure from a Vicar's peculiarities or from churchwardens who may dogmatically rule. Indeed, a like condition applies to other professions, that he stands or falls by the reciprocal nature of his services. As a rule, the Nonconformist congregations greatly appreciate the services of those who faithfully and devotedly minister to them in the Divine calling. They have not the pecuniary advantages which a Church establishment confers upon its ministers, but they, by their weekly offerings or pew-rents, not only provide a stipend in proportion to their ability, for their pastor, but also raise or provide funds for the expenses of the church and organisations associated with it. Even among the poor, it is wonderful how self-denying are their efforts to devote the "widow's mite" to the chapel with which they are associated. In the villages, the "Bethel" is often a centre of activity, and anniversary services—when there may be seen crowded congregations—or entertainments, bazaars, or sales of work combine to provide the finances and at the same time, to maintain the interest in matters pertaining to the chapel and its ministrations. There are still not a few parishes in which strong pressure is brought upon dependents to give their allegiance to the Established Church, and "None but Churchmen need apply" might often be added to appointments paid from the public purse, though the influence of public opinion and the Press has greatly broadened the religious views of former days and certainly encouraged more tolerance in the adoption of the form and method of public worship. Whilst many of the educated classes prefer the old and familiar liturgy, with its responses, and forms which have but little variation, others, and chiefly the middle class

worshippers, associate themselves with a service permeated with the impulses of the hour, extempore prayers, and impressive appeals to the intelligence and religious fervour of its congregations, which have a larger voice in the government of the denominations. It has been said that a State Church provides religious ministrations for every parish in the country, but if it were not for the various Nonconformist organisations, there would often be a deplorable starvation in the religious life of many of our villages.

Oatlands had an earnest man as its Rector, so far from "passing rich on forty pounds a year," that he enjoyed a comfortable stipend which enabled him to dispense some of the comforts of life to the poor who attached themselves to the Church. He ruled the village school with a somewhat imperious hand, and though he sometimes boasted that he knew no difference between the children of Churchmen and Dissenters in his school, it was certainly correct, in a sense which was repugnant to Nonconformists, for he gave orders that every child should be taught the Church Catechism, whatever their parents' belief might be. When the parents of Nonconformist children remonstrated, their offspring would be taught a collect "*Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee,*" which was so suggestive and which brought down upon them the pitying glances of the majority—and sometimes their gibes—that the children were inclined to feel that they were objects of ridicule and contempt which made them unpleasantly regarded by their fellow pupils. In this way, the schools were made the means of indirect influences among the children, and the parents dependent upon the squire or farmers for their employment and living, felt obliged to be guarded in their objections, although they inwardly resented this intrusion upon that liberty of conscience in religious matters which Englishmen claim to exercise. Whilst fearing the consequences of outspokenness, they nursed their injured feelings in silence until an election or some secret means of expressing their views gave them

the opportunity of showing a resentment to such a disregard of their convictions and of helping forward the day when creeds and catechisms would not thus divide the sheep from the goats, but all receive either that simple Bible teaching which should act as a lamp unto their feet and a light unto their footsteps, whilst leaving to other agencies the imparting of doctrinal knowledge.

The Rev. John Priestley had many good qualities and was esteemed by his flock. But towards the schoolmaster and schoolmistress he, at times, exercised his authority somewhat peremptorily, as Chairman of the Managers, which body included his Curate, his churchwarden, and the principal farmer, so that it was impossible to limit his control. The services of the teachers were often demanded in Church matters, though they felt that their own duties to the children of the village required their strength and full powers. This condition of things so increased as to cause difficulty. One day the Rector and his wife called upon the schoolmaster to ask him to take a class in the Sunday School. Hitherto, the day had been to them a time of rest from the labours of the week, and while they attended the Church services, on Sunday, they disapproved of the high ritual which was practised there, and felt more sympathy with the Evangelical views of some of their Nonconformist friends in the village with whom they had had much pleasant intercourse and comparison of views upon religious topics. The grievances of the Nonconformists in having to endure the teaching of the Catechism to their children were regretted by both the master and mistress. The Vicar, however, approached the subject by diplomatically expressing his pleasure that they both attended the ministrations of the Church, and remarked that he felt sure they would wish to render more active service to Holy Church. He further commended their methods of teaching in the week-day school and appealed to them to give their services in the Sunday School where they would be most highly valued.

The Schoolmaster, Mr. Cross, who had hitherto been able to keep upon fairly good terms with the Managers of the School, felt extremely uncomfortable when he heard this suggestion, for it flashed upon him that, out of a small matter of this kind, serious issues might arise. His countenance fell, but whilst meditating a more definite answer, he cautiously replied to the request,

"I thought, sir, the diligent discharge of my week-day duties in the school, absolved me from similar work on the Sunday."

"Oh, no," said the Vicar, "many of us have to work seven days in the week, and teaching, you know, is so easy to you. It will be no effort!"

Mr. Cross argued the point in vain, the Rector was determined, while his wife suggested that it was the duty of the schoolmaster and schoolmistress to help forward the work of the true Church, so that the Dissenters might not draw away the children.

Mr. Cross was afraid to defend the earnestness and consistency of his Nonconformist friends, as he knew that would only end in his dismissal, and his daily bread depended upon either holding that appointment or obtaining a testimonial from the Vicar for another one. What could he do if he left Oatlands without a testimonial or recommendation? So Mr. Cross reluctantly asked for time to think it over, the Rector giving a significant hint of the consequences that a refusal might involve "if the Managers were to know." There was, obviously, no other course open to him than to acquiesce, if he wished to retain his appointment and, most unwillingly, he wrote a note intimating his intention to undertake the duties in a fortnight's time.

The Vicar, having secured his point, replied that he felt sure he would feel amply rewarded for his loyalty to the Church, and casually mentioned that it would be a great relief to Mrs. Priestley if his wife, the schoolmistress, would *occasionally* take the harmonium for her at the Sunday School when she was unable to be present. It would be

so little trouble to Mrs. Cross, as she was so clever in teaching the children singing in the week-day school. But Mrs. Cross was by no means strong in health and she dreaded any addition to her work which was already involving a strain upon her to maintain the standard required by the Managers in order to ensure a high grant. If she pleaded to be excused, she feared that their dismissal would be but a question of time. How could they, as young married folk, with furniture not yet out of debt, run that risk. So that her own health, the craving of a wearied mind and body for some rest, and the aversion to the pressing methods which were used upon children, as well as teachers, had to be put aside, for who would help them if they were cast adrift upon the world possibly with no testimonial at all or one that would give them little chance amongst more fortunate applicants? So for the time being, they thought it prudent to submit.

Owing partly to the depressed condition of agriculture, Oatlands was declining in population. Nor was it to be wondered, for it was not a parish doing anything to help the increase of a vigorous and self dependent rural population. It had neither allotments nor small holdings, there was no reading-room or place other than the public-house where winter evenings could be spent, and there was no scope for a man to improve his outlook of life. During the past generation, half the labourers had deserted the land. Labour-saving machinery, the disheartening future, of which they had evidence in the old age of those around them, and compared with this the attractive features of large towns and the glowing descriptions of Colonial opportunities, had materially contributed to this decrease. Mr. Denton, M.P., and his friends were anxious that the torrent of depopulation all over the country districts should be stemmed, and the question of retention of the agricultural labourers in the villages was seriously discussed. The remedy was believed to lie in the desirability of giving the men a stake in the land. In an adjoining county, where large owners had divided some

of their farms into small holdings, anxiety had been shown to obtain them and if security of tenure or a possibility of leasing land could be assured, there would be an intense cultivation which would materially add to the prosperity of the country. It was known that in one parish, where the demand for allotments had been met, a number of men came forward and applied for holdings of several acres. These men had been working allotments for a few years, and by toil and thrift had saved a little money, so were consequently in a position to enter the ranks of small holders. To quote the words of one Member of Parliament, they were gradually climbing the ladder which would secure a reasonable competence for their old age.

CHAPTER V.

THE PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATIVE OF THE
EASTGATE DIVISION.

Mr. William Denton, the Parliamentary representative for the Eastgate Division, was the chief partner in a banking firm which had grown rapidly in importance and had extended its branches over a portion of three counties. Established nearly a century before, it had year by year enlarged its *clientèle* until it had become recognised as an institution which commanded the confidence of the financial and commercial world. In its earliest days its beginnings were of a very humble character, and there were traditions associated with the old coaching days of a run upon the Bank, necessitating the hasty dispatch of one of the firm, to return as quickly as possible with fresh supplies of gold to satisfy the demands of those withdrawing their money. One device to restore confidence, was said to have been the screwing of a bushel measure, the wrong way upwards, to the bank counter and its bottom then covered over with golden sovereigns. A strong man was asked to lift it, which of course, he could not do, and the people went away satisfied that it must be full of gold. That was when a famous Yorkshire Bank stopped payment and five London banks, as well as a hundred or more country houses failed to meet the demands made upon them. But since then, there had been more prosperous days, commerce had grown with the railways, as

well as other developments, and Denton and Co's Bank was known as a household word for wise management, while its principals were highly esteemed as philanthropists and men of unimpeachable integrity.

Mr. Denton was a prominent member of a well-known Nonconformist family, and he and his family were benefactors not only to the charitable and educational institutions of Eastgate, but they also sought the religious and material welfare of the adjoining village of Oatlands where Witley Court was situated. So great was the regard felt for Mr. Denton that he had been chosen to represent the Eastgate Division in Parliament, and in that position was showing a most anxious desire to advance the welfare of his constituents and to improve the condition of the toilers of the country. He had seen the migration from Oatlands of many of the most promising young men, who were discouraged by the apparent impossibility of improving their condition or of making provision for their old age, and whilst yet single, determined to seek their fortunes either in the larger towns or by crossing the seas to Australia, New Zealand or other outposts of the British Empire. Mr. Denton deplored the loss of some of their most promising sons of the soil, but realising what the end must be, if they remained at Oatlands, he could only approve their foresight. At the same time, he and his family determined to do what they could to make village life more attractive and to help them to make provision for their declining years.

Witley Court was a substantial old-fashioned house, square built, very roomy and a comfortable family residence. The grounds around the house, or the Court, as it was called by the villagers, were characterised by fine old spreading trees, whose umbrageous boughs shed an air of solemnity over the rich meadows upon which well conditioned sheep were grazing. The gardens contained hardy palms, well-grown trees, some a century old, while towering shrubs bordered the expanse of velvet green lawns and geometrical carpet beds. It was a charming place,

kept in excellent cultivation, and its glass-houses sheltered rare orchids, typical of the magnificent luxuriance of the tropics. Inside the Hall, the decorations were of the Queen Anne period, handsomely panelled rooms, with acorn and rose adornments, beautifully carved bosses of flowers and fruit with butterflies poised on the flowers and bearing a charming resemblance to nature. Over the drawing room mantel, a skilfully carved eagle held, in its beak, festoons of drapery and flowers, deeply cut and almost faultless in execution and graceful design, telling of skilful French carvers, who had left the impress of their deftness behind them. Its library was full of treasures, for Mr. Denton revelled in works of beauty and rarity, when he could acquire them.

But Oatlands had another prominent resident of a different character. Sir William Greenwood, M.P., of Eagle Hall, Oatlands, was reputed to be a man of substance, who had accumulated a fortune by his factories in England and Germany. He had been chosen to represent in Parliament a Northern constituency, where one of his factories were situated, and by his employment of labour acquired a certain influence which enabled him to retain his seat, although his party was not in the ascendant. Austere in manner, with an autocratic bearing, he was feared more than respected, and it was assumed that his broad acres implied a full purse. Speculation was even rife in the village as to the amount his estate would produce to the death duties if he did not apportion it before he bade farewell to the world. But it was not realised how encumbered these estates were, how keen was the competition in his business, a difficulty which he invariably attributed to the neglect of the ruling powers to protect his particular industry, but which was more probably caused by the want of capital to enable him to employ improved machinery and skilled labour, which would compete with his rivals. Unfortunately, much that he had accumulated in the past fat years, had been squandered in gambling and racing, for that indeed, was

one secret of Sir William Greenwood's embarrassment and impecuniosity. It often made him irritable and unreasonable, so that when he was required to administer justice, as it was called, his excitable temperament, at times, beclouded his judgment and made his decisions more feared than respected for their soundness. Sir William lived in an old-fashioned mansion of Elizabethan character and approached by a drive through an avenue of ancient oaks. The piers of the entrance gate were surmounted by two eagles in stone, with their wings extended as though about to mount aloft, and these heraldic emblems of magnanimity and fortitude seem to have given the name to the Hall for it had always been known by the title of Eagle Hall. Tradition said that a famous knight of former days had borne the device on his banner in imitation of the Roman Eagles of ancient times.

Sir William Greenwood had one child—a son on whom both he and the late Lady Greenwood who had recently died, centred their hopes. He had been brought up with every indulgence that could be afforded, and although the young heir was supposed to be in training for the life of a country gentleman, he often spent much of his time at his father's London house and sometimes was permitted to accompany him to race-meetings. Thrown thus into company that exercised a demoralising influence upon his character, he imbibed a taste for those gambling propensities which prove the ruin of so many of its followers. Inexperienced and easily led, Cyril Greenwood was in danger of ruining his prospects in life at the outset of his manhood. Of a naturally frank and generous character, but with little discernment as to the characteristics of his associates, his good nature was easily imposed upon. Nominally, he was a farming pupil, his father having entrusted his business training to his steward, but as Cyril spent most of the season in London and his father exercised but little restraint upon his indulgences, his education in agricultural matters was of a very superficial character. Of horses he knew something and the attractions of the

turf relieved him of much of the allowance which he received from his father.

Eagle Hall was but four miles from Oatlands, and consequently Cyril had met Gladys Denton when in the country. Their first meeting was not without romance. Cyril, as a cyclist, was always a reckless rider, and in racing along the country roads, he unwittingly struck and injured a child who was crossing the road near the village. Gladys saw the accident, and with her usual kindness of heart, picked up the boy, staunched his bleeding head as well as she could with her handkerchief, bathing it with some water from a brook which was near, and binding up the wound with a skill and tenderness that not only gained Cyril's admiration of her knowledge of ambulance training, but aroused a deep interest. As the fair young girl, with flowing flaxen hair, stooped over her little patient, Cyril regarded her as an angel of mercy who had quite captured his heart. Putting the injured boy on his bicycle, he walked with Gladys by his side, and taking the little one home, left a handsome solatium with the boy's mother, after explaining how the accident had occurred and expressing his regret at the injury done, happily not of a very serious character.

Gladys Denton, who had known Cyril but slightly before, was attracted by his generous nature and his handsome appearance, so that a mutual understanding seemed to result almost from their first meeting. They often met afterwards, and by a singular coincidence, their visits to the mother's cottage, where the injured boy lay, were so fortunately timed, that those who did not know the ingenuity of lovers, would suspect that there was pre-arrangement rather than chance traceable. Possibly the thought-reading of two hearts, acting in combination, might suggest some solution of this Zancig manifestation. By the time the invalid boy had recovered, Cyril and Gladys were warm friends, as the following conversation will show:

"It was a fortunate circumstance, Miss Denton," said

Cyril, "that you were there when that child was hurt, for no-one but you could have handled it so tenderly and skilfully, and I told his mother your promptness had saved the boy much loss of blood."

"It was providential, indeed, Mr. Greenwood, that something was done to help the poor dear child at once or it might have been serious," said Gladys, "and you would never have forgiven yourself."

"Well, accidents will happen, you know, and cyclists cannot be expected to crawl through the country, at the pace of a tortoise, even though mishaps may occur."

"I am afraid lest you should meet with one yourself," said Gladys, "if you travel so fast."

Cyril flushed with pleasure as he realised the tender anxiety which she betrayed, and replied,

"If I do get an upset, Miss Denton, I hope your bandages will be available, not to mention the skilled treatment of your experienced hands."

It was Gladys' turn to blush, and as the colour rose to her cheeks, Cyril thought he had never seen her look more charming. Taking her hand as he walked by her side, he blurted out,

"Gladys, I shall never care for any one half so much as you. Before we separate, will you not say that you will accept that love?"

Gladys startled by the suddenness of his declaration, seemed to check her own feelings, as she replied, "No, Mr Greenwood, we are too young yet, and we neither of us know what our future may be. When you have the prospect of a home, and a position in life, it will be time enough to think of such dreams. I am going to town to-morrow with my father, and hope we may some time meet again."

Cyril said good-bye with a heavy heart, for carried away by the depth of his affection for her, he had not stopped to reflect that he had not anything to offer her beyond promises. But Gladys Denton knew that Cyril, handsome and generous though he was, was often reckless

and thoughtless, and she hesitated to commit her future into the hands of one who thought more of the pursuit of pleasure than endeavouring to face the stern realities of life. So that both these young people went to their homes with aching hearts—the one to resume the sowing of his wild oats, the other to fervently hope that Cyril might be led to regard life as a trust that should not be wasted but devoted to those useful purposes which contribute to the happiness of man's existence.

CHAPTER VI.

GILES SEEKS HIS FORTUNES IN THE CROWDED CITY.

John and Mary Woodhouse waited in vain for a message or answer to their letter from their Member of Parliament. For though they expected it had long ago reached the busy Metropolis, it had really travelled no further than the neighbouring town of Eastgate. The postman had slipped it into his pocket, forgot that it was there, and finding it some days afterwards, carefully opened it and read the contents. Smeared and blurred with the tears shed over its laborious composition, it was not easy to decipher. But having puzzled it out, he began to wonder what he should do with it. The date of the letter would show that a delay had taken place, and the Member of Parliament might make a complaint to the Post Office, or at least, he feared it would be so. The letter would never do any good and John and Mary, poor simple folk, would never be the wiser, if it were not sent. So, uneasy in mind, and yet unable to think of any other way out of his difficulty, he pushed the letter into a drawer and tried to forget about it.

But it was not the first dereliction of duty that he had committed whilst His Majesty's servant. For many years he had been an honest and trustworthy rural postman, until some racing circulars which were passing through the Post Office attracted his attention. He fell

into the trap, risked his hard earned wages which his wife and family needed, and backed a horse to win a race. If he had been fortunate enough to lose, he might have learned wisdom. But he won, risked more and won again. The tempter urged him on each time, increasing his risk, until a turn in the tide of fortune came and he lost all. The infatuation had seized him. He thought of it as he lay awake at night and resolved upon another throw. But he had no money. A letter passed through his hands which contained postal orders, and he sacrificed character, principle and all the teaching of his early days at his mother's knee or in the Sunday School, to satisfy the terrible and degrading gambling appetite. The orders were sent away, but it mattered not what became of them. His conscience was seared, he had betrayed his trust, he was a thief! He fell into debt and pilfering again and again, he became almost afraid to deliver his letters, lest he should be accused by some of those poor people whom he had so cruelly robbed. Complaints had, of course, been made, he had been questioned, and denied everything. Detectives were at work and a test letter fell in his way, which containing some money, he appropriated and took to his home. The man's countenance almost betrayed his guilt, for his jaunty good humour no longer asserted itself, but deep furrowed lines on his forehead told of trouble within that was destroying the happiness which an honest and upright man feels, even though his struggles against poverty may be hard to bear.

The discovery of his dishonesty came more suddenly than the postman expected. The test letter had not been delivered. It could be, step by step, traced to his possession, and the searching of his cottage by a detective betrayed a nefarious system of concealing and pilfering of letters, the test letter among them, which carelessly thrust into a drawer, with betting circulars and racing calendars, told only too truly the whole history of the ruin of a once trusted servant of His Majesty's Postmaster-General. John and Mary's letter was there too, without direction,

and, like the others, it was impounded in view of the trial that would follow the postman's arrest. Let us draw a veil over the sad picture of a weeping wife to whom the young children were clinging, and whose prospects were thus blighted so unexpectedly. The gambling propensity had found one more victim, as alas it will find many more, if these circulars which cast evil temptations broadcast are permitted to use the post to publish their nefarious designs among simple-minded folk.

It was the most painful duty of the justices of his own town, who had known the uniformed postman for years, to hear the chain of evidence, pieced together so skilfully, as the successive stages of the transmission of the fatal missive were described. Committal to the Assizes, two years' imprisonment, a ruined young life and a wife and family dishonored. How sad a story! And when John and Mary received their letter back that they had so carefully prepared some months before, they shed tears once more, this time over the sad fate of the postman whom they knew so well, and thought but little of the trouble that had suggested their own letter. "No old age pension for him," said John with a sore heart, for despite the rough and tumble life their poverty had compelled them to lead, they had tender hearts for those who were in any trouble.

"I shall go and see his wife and try to comfort her," said Mary, "for two years is a long time for her to struggle. An' I think that may be we could p'haps help her to get a living somehow."

Such are the sympathies of the poor for each other, their own difficulties and sorrow being happily obliterated at times by the happiness which a word or action of sympathy can convey even more touchingly than material help.

But John and Mary, though sympathetic with others were not without further anxieties of their own. For Giles, having served his time with Farmer Langley, had become unsettled, and made up his mind to go to London.

Their daughter, Rose, felt very unhappy about it, knowing by her own experiences something of the temptations of the great, lonely city—lonely, indeed, to the stranger and wayfarer—despite its bustling thoroughfares and crowded pavements. Giles, however, wanted, as he naively put it, "to see life." The country was dull, there was no reading room, where he could spend his evening when his horses were groomed and fed, and though there was an occasional concert or supper in connection with the village Friendly Society, he thought his life was very dull, compared with the amusements of which his old chums who had left some months before, told him. He could, surely, earn enough to keep himself, and while his master and others advised him of the difficulties he would have to encounter, he preferred to purchase his own experience, even though it might be at a high price. So he put his few belongings together in a bundle, and with his harvest earnings in his pocket, took train from Eastgate. To his parents, honest country folk, it was a grief, because they feared the temptations that Giles would meet, and the difficulties that a young countryman would have to surmount in order to make his way. Rose cried bitterly at parting with her sweetheart, and gave many injunctions to him to tell her of his doings. For she knew from what she had seen at the previous year's Statute fair that if Giles fell in with bad companions, he might have to pay a heavy penalty for his inexperience.

Rose waited anxiously for the first news and was somewhat reassured when she found he had, after some weeks of idleness, obtained employment in some livery stables. For day after day he had tramped through the populous city and had almost come to an end of his slender means, when a groom in livery took him in to his employer as a likely man to help in the stables. So Giles was duly installed, only too glad to find that he was earning, for the time, at least, enough to provide him with a bare living. Giles' work was hard and his hours were long, much longer than he had been accustomed to in the

country, when the evenings were times of leisure. But now, the horses were out late at night taking people home from the theatres and places of entertainment, and midnight had often struck before he had rubbed his horses down and made everything snug for the night. He turned into his humble garret tired out with his day's work, and sometimes cast longing thoughts back to the less laborious village life which he had led. But he was attracted, in a measure, by the glamour and rush of City life, its changing panorama, new scenes, new experiences, and much to interest a countryman who had seen nothing of the ways of a great city. Around him there was to be found squalor, uncleanness, crime, drunkenness, and much from which he had been taught to shrink as harmful, and it needed some resolution, and all the influence of Rose, who wrote warning him of the entanglements into which he might fall, to avoid being drawn into the vortex of the struggling mass around him. Often his heart sickened as some sad scene of wretchedness passed before his eyes, which made him feel that, after all, if a country life were dull and uneventful, there was yet a freedom from the trampling down of one and another in the struggle for existence.

One night, when the House of Commons was sitting, he received orders to drive to the Member's entrance at Westminster for a gentleman, whom he found to be none other than Mr. William Denton, M.P. for Extonshire. Giles touched his hat with a smile of recognition as Mr. Denton came out, and with a cheery "Glad to see you in London, sir," was at once recognised by the Member as having lived in his division and been one of his workers.

"Well, Giles, what are you doing in town," said the M.P.

Giles somewhat sheepishly replied that he found things very dull at home, and thought he would like to see a bit of life in the great city.

"Well," said Mr. Denton, "I hope you will get on well, but it is sometimes uphill work, you will find, and

there are many temptations for young men. But if I can be of any service to you, I will be pleased to do what I can."

Giles thanked him, and the Member stepping into the carriage, Giles, with some feeling of pride that he was driving the Member for his own district, carefully piloted his way through the maze of motor-buses, cabs and other vehicles, and landed his fare at the fashionable address given to him.

"Good-night, Giles," said Mr. Denton, as he left the carriage, "don't forget to come to me if you are in a difficulty, or if I can be of service to you."

Giles thanked him, and Mr. Denton passed up the carpeted steps, into the brilliantly lighted entrance, through lines of liveried footmen. While the gaily dressed company thronged the doors, Giles stopped to gaze with admiring wonder upon the brilliant scene. But the police injunction to move on awoke him from his reverie, and he drove away, feeling that in the great and lonely city, he had one friend to whom he could go, if he needed advice.

Giles had often seen Mr. Denton attending service in the village in the same humble place of worship to which Rose and he went, and at times had heard Mr. Denton speak words of encouragement and help to young men and women, and point them to the Friend who, even in the mazes and temptations of large cities to which some were eager to immigrate, would direct their footsteps and keep them from falling. So that Giles, pondering over those happy days in the past, when Rose was at his side, took courage and felt that whatever befell him he would strive to go straight throughout life. Which resolve he wrote down in black and white and sent on to Rose, who was much relieved by his wise determination, and breathed a fervent hope that he might prove an honest and faithful servant.

CHAPTER VII.

CYRIL'S FORTUNES CHANGE.

Cyril Greenwood did not go home and forget his interview with Gladys Denton, but when she returned from town, he took every opportunity of seeing her. Gladys, flattered by his attentions and really liking his company, yet felt she could not encourage his suit, for several reasons. Although her own father and Cyril's father were on friendly terms, when they met in the House, which they frequently did, yet their views were widely divergent, they usually voted in different lobbies and sat on different sides of the House. Sir W. Greenwood was a Churchman, when he attended anywhere, and a rigid supporter of all the traditions of Church and State, believing that the State would suffer from the separation of the one from the other, and that the school children should be taught the creeds of that church. But Mr. Denton was an active Free Churchman, who believed that no man should be compelled to contribute towards the teaching of creeds and catechisms in which he did not believe. So Gladys, who was a regular worshipper in the village chapel, and helped in its organisations, found that whilst Cyril's education and refinement fascinated her, and his generous open-hearted character appealed to her love of manliness, yet his companionships, when not under her influence, seemed almost certain to lead him into an evil course that would involve misery and shame. Having, like a

prudent daughter, first consulted her mother, she felt it would not be right to conceal from him the distrust that she felt, and one day when walking through the village, Cyril joined her and asked if he might accompany her.

Gladys frankly said that she was going to visit a sick woman, but she wished to speak to him on a matter that did not feel she ought longer to withhold. Gladys then explained as pleasantly as she could, the differences in their tastes and beliefs, and remarked that while their acquaintance ought not to continue, she hoped they would always be friends, though they could not meet in any other way.

Cyril noticed the evident effort with which this was said, but felt keenly the blighting of his hopes by the apparent sincerity of her decision. He replied,

I hope, Gladys, you have not made up your mind so that I cannot have the opportunity of showing to you how sincerely I desire to make your life a happy one. I know there are some differences between our families, but I do not see that should be sufficient to separate two young people who are really attached to each other.

Gladys felt her strong resolution somewhat waver by the persuasive character of his argument, but she felt she must plainly state her position.

That may be so, Mr. Greenwood, but I am afraid the direction of your life and mine seriously differ. Your choice seems to be for a life of gaiety, sometimes perhaps attending the racecourse, and possibly placing yourself in the way of temptations that would make me feel anxious and unhappy. I may possibly regard it from what you would consider a narrow stand-point, but my training has led me to recoil from any association with betting or gambling and its attendant evils.

Cyril could not deny that he had attended race-meetings and even indulged in some betting and card-playing for stakes, in which he had almost invariably lost whatever he risked. Hence, in the impulse of the moment, he exclaimed,

"I am perfectly willing," Miss Denton, "to give up attending such places or betting, if it is likely to cause any difference between us, and I should certainly never wish to give you anxiety on that score."

Gladys felt somewhat gratified by his promise of self-sacrifice, but, at the same time she felt there was a gulf between them in their surroundings that made her feel that she was not prepared to give him encouragement in his suit. She replied,

"I cannot help admiring your willingness to sacrifice some of your pleasures for my sake, but I am not sure that your life and mine would harmonise and, at present, it would be certainly better that we should think seriously of the possibilities of the future before coming to any decision."

Cyril saw that it was of no use to urge the matter, and that Gladys required more time for consideration, but somewhat diplomatically begged to be allowed to have the pleasure of her company until she reached the cottage to which she was going. The consent was given, and he felt his suit could not be altogether distasteful to her, and this was confirmed by the willingness with which she talked as they slowly strolled along the country road. When they parted, it was evident that there was a feeling of mutual interest, and the question which disturbed Gladys' mind was obviously whether that should be permitted to develop into deeper and stronger sentiments, or be nipped in the bud.

Unfortunately, however, Cyril Greenwood's life was destined to be a troublous one. Disappointed in his efforts to secure the affections of Gladys Denton, he seemed to care less than ever to devote himself to business matters, and instead of following his pursuits upon the estate and striving to make it yield a profit, he grew more and more fond of gay company and of late hours. In other words, his extravagance and indifference to anything but his own selfish pleasures caused his father great worry and trouble in his old age and declining years. One

winter's afternoon Sir William Greenwood, after an exhausting day directing the men in the felling of timber on his estate, was found on his way home to have sunk to the ground on the roadway, having been struck with paralysis. The village ambulance was obtained, he was removed to Eagle Hall, and his son telegraphed for. But it was too late. Cyril did not arrive in time to see his father alive, for a constitution weakened by business and family cares, left him unable to resist the severity of the seizure. The funeral was largely attended by employes and villagers, but Cyril followed with a sad heart, for he felt that he would now be dependent upon his own resources, and he realised that he had not made the best of his opportunities. When the family solicitor informed him of the encumbered condition of the estates, the involved position of his father's factories, and intimated that almost everything would have to be realised, leaving little for him to inherit, he began to understand what a severe penalty followed in the train of a reckless and extravagant life. And worse than all, having nothing to offer Gladys Denton, he could not hope to change her resolve. It was a bitter experience for a young man on the threshold of life, but he could see no alternative than to accept the position in which his folly had placed him, and resolve to go out into the world and earn his own livelihood. He had had but little business training or experience, but he would strive to abandon his former habits and win respect by his perseverance and industry. Such were his resolves when his troubles had made him depressed, and how they were realised or otherwise his future history will reveal. He received a letter of sympathy from Mr. Denton, expressed in the kindest terms, and conveying also his daughter's desire to be associated with those sentiments, which intimation from Gladys was greatly valued by him and even gave him hope.

Cyril, upon investigating his father's affairs, came to the conclusion that there would be little or nothing for him to receive, and he resolved to emigrate to New

Zealand. There he would be freed from the temptation to resume his former habits and to join his old associates, whilst he hoped to find better opportunities of making a fresh start. Mr. Denton approved of his proposal, and generously offered to provide his passage, but Cyril would only accept it as a loan in the hope that soon after his arrival in the new country, he would be able to remit the amount. With a heavy heart, he took his leave of Mr. and Mrs. Denton and Gladys, promising to let them know of his arrival and prospects.

Before leaving, Cyril also bade farewell to John Woodhouse, who had been in his father's employ for a great many years, and was regarded as a faithful and honest retainer by the family. The poor old man almost broke down as he expressed his sorrow at the changed fortunes of the young master, and could not repress an expression of fear that as the farm would have to be sold he might not retain his situation. "You have," he said, "health and strength on your side and are going to a new country, which my son says is like the Promised Land in the Old Book "flowing with milk and honey." As for me, I am worn out, and having never had a chance to save, there is nothing for me but the Workhouse, or a small pittance outside. In the country you are going to, anyone that has worked as I have, would get a sufficient pension, but Mr. Cyril, there will be nothing here for poor folk until I am dead and gone." Cyril was touched by the man's sad position, and tried to assure him that Mr. Denton was doing all he could to help forward some scheme to meet such cases as his, but the old toiler sadly shook his head. He had heard about small holdings, old age pensions and "back to the land" proposals so often that he began to regard them as idle dreams that would not be fulfilled in his day. Cyril took his son's address in New Zealand, and promised to endeavour to see him if his journeyings should carry him near to his home.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER AND OLD AGE PENSIONS.

When Mr. Denton's conversation with Giles Day, which is recorded in a previous chapter, took place, he was on the way, driven by Giles, to the town residence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, for the purpose of attending a reception given in view of the much anticipated Budget. The Member for Extonshire had been taking every reasonable opportunity for pressing upon the Chancellor the desirability of appropriating a portion of his surplus, towards carrying out an experiment which would put to the test the practicability of awarding pensions in the first instance, to those most advanced in years. Some of Mr. Denton's friends indeed regarded him as somewhat of a "crank" on this subject, because of the ardour with which he propounded his views, in season and even, sometimes, out of season, so anxious was he that a Parliament containing a large number of sympathisers with his views should have the opportunity of bringing it within the range of practical politics.

The brilliantly illuminated *salons* had attracted a galaxy of statesmen and politicians of various shades of opinion, who with their ladies, debated the possibilities of the disposal of the surplus after Easter. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, willing though he might be to hear the multiplicity of ideas put forward by others, had

no revelation to make which would anticipate the financial policy that the Budget statement would disclose. But, seeing Mr. Denton, he ventured to suggest that he must not feel disappointed if the exigencies of the present demands upon him, should involve the solution of the Old Age Pension question being deferred for a time. Mr. Denton's chagrin was evident, and he replied that he had cherished the hope that some small instalment of a scheme would at least have given evidence of the good faith of the Government towards their supporters, who were certainly most anxiously awaiting a declaration of policy, which might, within a reasonable period, culminate in a workable scheme. He argued further, that a person who had conducted himself as a good citizen, and contributed to the wealth of his country was entitled to honourable maintenance when, through old age, he was unable to provide it for himself. The hopelessness and even the recklessness, to which the impossibility felt by the labouring poor to provide for old age sometimes led, was pleaded by the Member for Extonshire with an earnestness that obviously appealed to the judgment of the great financier in whose hands rested the destiny of the overplus of the national finances. The Chancellor listened with evident appreciation to his friend's warm advocacy of the cause of the needy poor. But he pointed out that a great and expensive war had vastly increased the expenditure of the country, raising the income-tax to a war level, and involving other adjustments of taxation which would need consideration. To which he humorously added the remark that the Chancellor of the Exchequer was certainly not to be envied, for whatever course of action he might elect to adopt, in the best interests of the Empire, it would be quite impossible to satisfy all demands and opinions.

This non-committal reply was indeed all that Mr. Denton expected to receive, and the Chancellor adroitly turned aside to banter a well-known woman Suffragist advocate, who was only too pleased, at this social function, to have the opportunity of tackling a Member of the

Government. But here, too, the astute statesman gave no pledges beyond the usual platitudes, under cover of which discreet members of a Cabinet conceal the sometimes diverse views of that body until such time as a united policy can be declared.

The brilliant scene was, however, more than a mere political *réunion*, for, with the accompaniments of delightful music, the exchange of ideas by some of the cleverest conversationalists of the day indicated how much goodwill exists among men of widely different views when political differences are banished for the time.

Mr. Denton was by no means disheartened by the attitude of the Chancellor of the Exchequer to his scheme, for he felt that though he had replied with characteristic diplomacy and caution, there was in the background, an earnest desire, whenever he could find a practical outlet, to deal with the question on broad and statesmanlike lines. But the time was not ripe. Nevertheless, he had taken one step in the direction of an Old Age Pension campaign. On his return home, he wrote a letter to his friend, Mr. Herbert Wright, telling him of his rising hopes that some scheme would ere long be considered.

In the political world, indeed, there were great anticipations of what might take place during that session of Parliament. The Chancellor of the Exchequer had been understood to have ear-marked certain amounts in order to meet the demands which would necessarily be made upon his resources, and the result of his carefully considered proposals were to be placed before the House of Commons. Forecasts were as plentiful as blackberries in autumn, rich men hoped for concessions on the income-tax, poor men favoured the abolition of the tea and sugar duties, while financiers thought the money market would be strengthened by the reduction of debt. But in the Eastern Counties and other agricultural districts there was a deep-rooted longing among the labouring classes that the day of emancipation was approaching, that provision for the old age of toilers was at last to be initiated—if only on experi-

mental and limited lines—yet a practical test that would lead to further developments.

There was a buzz of excitement in the House and unusual interest as the members thronged the lobbies. Mr. Denton, M.P., was there eager and expectant, but many were evidently querulous and doubting. All was hushed when the Chancellor of the Exchequer rose to disclose his financial statement. With the cleverness of a shrewd and experienced financier, toying with figures like a juggler with his conjuring tricks, he secured attentive ears to statistics that would otherwise be dull. Here he adjusted, there he temporised, reduced in this direction, and skilfully manipulated in another direction without his audience realising that an increase of taxation would result. And then for the moment, casting aside the dull detailment of figures, he enlarged upon the claims of an Old Age Pension scheme, electrifying his hearers as he pictured that weary round of honest toil for which, in a land of freedom, there was no better reward to offer than a Workhouse existence and a pauper's grave! In a pleasant town in the Eastern Counties he had seen, he said, a worthy monument to the memory of a noble man, Thomas Clarkson, who spent his life in promoting the liberation of the slave, and in conjunction with William Wilberforce, a Member of that House, succeeded in accomplishing their great and philanthropic object. But it was done at a great cost. The emancipation of these negroes involved the expenditure of millions of money which the Chancellor ventured to say, was one of the most Christian-like appropriations of a country's wealth that this country had ever voted. His appeal was now for the sacrifice that would be involved by a nation providing adequately and reasonably, for its deserving poor, for those who had contributed largely to its wealth, but had not shared in the development of the resources of the country that had resulted. Proceeding then, amid almost breathless interest, in a House whose floors and galleries were packed, the Chancellor outlined a scheme by which all persons over

70 years of age, who required it, should receive a pension of five shillings per week. Financial considerations made it impossible that all persons above that age, who applied for it, should receive such a pension, and whatever arguments might be employed in its favour, the fact that it would postpone the realization of a long cherished hope was a sufficient reply to its advocates. He proposed, in the first instance, to appropriate some six millions of money to providing these pensions as far as they would go, women having the preference, and limitations being placed upon the nature of the cases eligible for such pensions. To administer this fund, an Old Age Pension Committee would be appointed, entirely dissociated from the Poor Law Administration, although having access to its records. The Old Age Pension Committee would, with due consideration to age, character, industry, steadiness, respectability of life and infirmity apportion a certain number of pensions as rewards for a reputable and honest life, without regard to creed, politics or like considerations. The revenue would be augmented by the adjustment of death duties, graduated income tax, unearned increment and other sources, and as these yielded increased amounts, the system, if found to prove satisfactory, would ultimately develop into those of less age than seventy, if really incapacitated from work, becoming recipients. In order to encourage thrift and provision for old age, a sum of from 2d. to 3d. per week in the pound of an employé's wages would be paid by the employer each week into the Post Office, which should accumulate with interest for the purpose of augmenting the pension, and if the person who had contributed it did not live to require it, be available in part for his family or heirs. No person having an income of 10s. per week and upwards should, under ordinary conditions, be allowed to receive a pension. The Chancellor of the Exchequer entered into many other financial and administrative details, and finally maintained that it would be impolitic and heartless to any longer defer the long cherished hopes of a brighter outlook for the working

population of our country in their declining years. There was an ascending chorus of those cries of "Hear, hear," which expressed the approval of the House, as the Chancellor sat down, after a four hours' amplification of his important proposals for the future disposal of the national finances. Debate followed, difficulties were raised, approval expressed, but it was felt that a great step had been taken towards the realization of an important development that would lighten the burden of the weary, and illumine with hope the dreariness of their life journey. Some opponents of the proposals indicated their apprehension of the consequences of such Socialistic developments. But Mr. Denton thanked God in his heart that there was a more hopeful day dawning for the village life of the country, and wrote to Mr. Herbert Wright a letter full of hope and encouragement. Even Giles, who had now been engaged as coachman to Mr. Denton in London, touched his hat as his master alighted at his residence, and said "Hope we shall get old age pensions, sir." To which Mr. Denton replied that it would still need some patience, but there were good chances of something being done.

CHAPTER IX.

CO-OPERATION AND PENSION SCHEME IN
GERMANY.

Although Oatlands was largely an agricultural village, some of the farmers, finding that fruit-growing promised a more remunerative return, had planted their land with trees. Mr. Herbert Wright, a friend of Mr. Denton, was one of those who had led a strenuous country life, and having a little capital to start with, had worked his way from a comparatively small occupation to the position of a successful cultivator of the soil. Perceiving the adaptability of the farm, which he had acquired, to fruit-growing, he planted it with the best and most marketable varieties he was able to afford, and after some years of thoughtful and careful management, found that his produce, in ordinarily good seasons, was yielding a highly remunerative return. He consequently extended his orchards, planted strawberry fields, and established a small fruit-preserving factory, where he could avoid the loss occasioned by a glut in the market. He soon discovered that there was, by these methods, an opening for the development of a successful undertaking by the utilization of the produce of his own farm and that grown by his neighbours. It has sometimes been said that the fact that the British farmer lives on an island may account, in some measure, for the insularity of his ways. He pursues his own time-honoured ideas, with a feeling of a

certain superiority to "what them furriners do," and buys and sells as he will. Once or twice a week, all the year round, he leaves his farm to go to market to buy and sell singlehanded what he requires or wishes to dispose of, as his father and grandfather did before him. The corn and seed merchants, artificial manure manufacturers, coal agents, and implement makers all have their trade combinations and rings, and pitted against the farmer, standing by himself, they often prove that union is strength. Mr. Wright saw the producers of wealth were thus at the mercy of the men who supply the materials and accessories. In what way, he asked himself, can the farmer improve his position so as to be able to hold his own against these combinations. He recognised that by co-operation, he might sell his goods to better advantage and also buy in a cheaper market. Out of about 200,000 farmers in the country only a fiftieth part were associated with co-operative societies. In one out-of-the-way district a co-operative society was formed by farmers, the members of which used, at one time, to go to individual seed and fertilizers, merchants, or agents, to buy. Now these business men were invited to interview a farmers' committee, which could undertake to buy in larger quantities and thus obtain better terms. In one case, a Society purchased a manure distributor, for the use of which non-members had to pay double the price charged to their own members. Merchants and dealers may not always favour such co-operative measures, but with the opportunities that are afforded by railroads, telegraphs, telephones, and newspaper advertising, a man with a little determination and judgment may find better markets for his produce than he once could. The farmer has a good deal of sound business, common sense and an attractive, as well as genial nature, and if he realised that a judicious combination, managed on prudent and business lines, would be more to his advantage than an isolated position, he would gladly avail himself of it. How much of an advantage may be obtained in purchasing his requirements

can be illustrated by the case of one agriculturist who, by combination, effected a saving of 15 per cent. on his feeding stuffs, 20 per cent. on his seeds, and as much as 30 per cent. on artificial manures. On a holding of 300 acres, a reduction of 15 per cent. on fertilisers and feeding stuffs added an increase of £47 to his net profit. One fifty-acre man saved £12 on his seeds in the first year that he joined such a combination. In such a way Mr. Wright contended that the farmer might do more for himself than Parliament will be able to do for him.

Mr. Wright's son had finished his school education and had also acquired, in an agricultural college, much valuable knowledge as to the science of soils and fertilizers, as well as observing the actual results of experimental fruit-farming. Harold Wright was no "lagarag" as the Eastern Counties vocabulary denominates a man whose idleness brings him to poverty, and his father had so judiciously embarked his capital in fruit growing that his venture soon began to show material prosperity. Nor was Mr. Herbert Wright indifferent to the welfare of those around him. His experience in the struggles of life made him anxious that a helping hand should be extended to the industrious toilers and that they, too, should have the opportunity that he had of climbing the ladder of life.

In spite of his business energies, Mr. Wright had found the opportunity to travel, and having earlier in life, resided for a time in Germany, he had acquired some knowledge of the practical ideas of that country. One innovation that he had watched with curiosity was the Old Age Pension Scheme which he thought, might possibly contain the elements of a contributory scheme that could be adopted in England in preference to entire dependence upon a State subsidy. He was anxious that Mr. Denton, before his return to town, should be more fully acquainted with some of its details, and an opportunity occurred when, having attended a business meeting, Mr. Denton invited him into Witley Court. The conversation soon led up to the subject which was in both their minds, and when

they had discussed the probabilities of the new proposals, Mr. Denton humorously tackling his visitor, remarked,

"Now, Herbert, what is this 'made in Germany' pension scheme of which you have got hold? Is it any use in this country?"

"If you begin by dubbing it a 'made in Germany' scheme, I am afraid it will never find favour," said Mr. Wright, "but after all, the Germans in these matters are a hard headed race, and here is a plan that has been in existence some sixteen or seventeen years.

"Are we so far behind our neighbours as that?" said Mr. Denton. We must not forget the old copy-book Latin motto "*Experientia docet*," at any rate."

"Exactly," said Mr. Wright, we may as well profit by the experience of others, even if some adaptations may have to be made to meet our insular prejudices."

"Is it regarded as a successful scheme in its general working?" asked Mr. Denton, his interest beginning to be aroused as he saw the possibility of acquiring some practical ideas towards a plan which had the elements of self-help prominent in its constitution.

Mr. Wright replied that it was working most satisfactorily. He explained that the Imperial Insurance Law of Germany, which insured working men against permanent ill-health and old age was first passed in June, 1889, and came into force in 1891. William I. had devoted much time to its preparation, and the present Emperor had further developed it, so that the problem had now been practically solved in Germany.

"What number of working people," asked Mr. Denton, "would there be, do you suppose?"

"Between eleven and twelve millions probably. Whilst a certain proportion of the required funds come from the State, the premium for this insurance scheme, for such it practically amounts to, is paid, one half by the workers and one half by the employers. The contribution is compulsory, every man or maid-servant, male or female factory worker, being bound to insure when they have completed

their sixteenth year. He or she will come into one of four classes, the first those who earn up to £18 per year, who contribute three farthings per week each; the second from £18 to £28, who contribute one penny per week; the third from between £28 to £42, who contribute a penny farthing per week; and the fourth from £42 to £100 per year, three half-pence. The employer has to hand in a like amount and is responsible for the payment of the workers' amounts as well, deducting them from the wages. In the case of the irregular workers, such as charwomen, the employer on the first day of the week pays the supplementary sum. The Post Office carries out the scheme and gives a receipt in the form of stamps, and it is sometimes called the "stick law," in view of the stamps being made adhesive to a card which the insurer holds. If a person is thrown out of employment by sickness or accident he can draw a sick pension.

"Then it protects the employer under the Compensation to Workmen's Act, as well as an Old Age Pension," remarked Mr. Denton, becoming much interested in this thrift encouraging plan.

"Exactly so," replied Mr. Wright. "After two years, five millions pounds were accumulated, and in twenty years, twenty to thirty millions will have been collected, a sum which is expected to be doubled in eighty years. In case of want of employment from sickness or accident, payments are made of from £5 to £7 per year, and increased proportionately according to the number of years that they have been insured. An old age pension is obtainable on reaching seventy years of age. If a man dies, without having benefitted, the widow and children inherit the sum to his credit, whilst if the woman dies, the children, if fatherless, receive it. In the case of an habitual drunkard, the pension is paid in kind."

"Really," Mr. Denton interposed, "there are some excellent points in this plan, and it helps the deserving at the same time that it encourages and even compels thrift and provision for the future."

"Yes, and it is not a charitable scheme, but worked on business lines. The State manages the whole business, and while the employer, and the insured, as well, contribute to it, it would meet the needs of a large class without making great inroads on the State resources. Employers would be saved paying their insurance premiums by the contribution of the same proportion as the worker paid."

Mr. Denton remarked that there were some points that might not possibly commend themselves to the British nation, but the general idea was a most excellent one, and he should certainly go into the matter further, with a view to laying information respecting it before the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

"I am glad you like the general basis," replied Mr. Wright, "because I believe it has the most important characteristic of helping those who help themselves. We often quote the proverb 'Heaven helps those who help themselves,' and the State might legitimately add to the benefits which the limited purse of a labouring man could obtain. As to the penny per week, more or less, it is cheerfully paid in Germany, because of the freedom from anxiety it insures, and there is no reason why it should not be so paid in England."

"A man, if he chose to do so, could still maintain his Friendly Society payments," said Mr. Denton, "to add to the small pension receivable in sickness with certain limitations. The proposal to give a pension to every one who claims it is so impracticable and too far-reaching, while this not only brings the proposal within reasonable limits, but makes the worker responsible and gives him an interest in its realization. There is something to be admired in the national discipline which has enabled the Germans to work their comprehensive Imperial system of national insurance and relief.

"Obviously," facetiously remarked Mr. Wright, "some schemes 'made in Germany' are worth imitation, in part, if not wholly. It is possibly wiser to profit by the experi-

ence of our neighbours than to buy our own too dearly by making costly, and it may be, unsatisfactory experiments. The fact that 920 out of every thousand of the working classes in Germany are now insured against sickness, accident or old age, is a source of legitimate pride to German statesmen.

Mr. Denton remarked that his friend's arguments were in favour of a partly contributory scheme, the amount of contribution being so small that it would scarcely be missed, and would be infinitesimal compared with the expenditure of some men upon indulgences. Such a scheme would at least educate men to be more provident and encourage them to adopt habits of thrift, if only in a very small degree.

Mr. Wright pointed out that not only in Germany, but in other countries where pensions had been adopted, it had the effect of increasing the money in the Savings Banks. Indeed, it seemed as if the new hopes of a brighter old age, had stimulated the desire to add to its comforts by accumulating additional sums when the ability to earn wages was past.

Mr. Denton admitted that was so, and thanking Mr. Wright for the valuable ideas he had given him, took his leave, wondering, on his way home, whether such a contributory scheme, subject to relief from contribution in case of absolute inability, could be adapted to the needs of his own country. Contributions were, as he well knew, sometimes made in pension schemes associated with the Poor Law, and it was obvious that the working man, who prized his independence, would value more highly a pension to which he had contributed some portion by his industry and self-denial. But he argued to himself, it must be sufficiently elastic in its administration to admit of exceptions being made under circumstances of extreme poverty.

CHAPTER X.

EXTONSHIRE M.P. ADDRESSES HIS CONSTITUENTS.

There was unusual excitement at Oatlands. The news of the discussion of Old Age Pension proposals in Parliament had reached the ears of the villagers through the bi-weekly journal and had awakened the greatest interest. John and Mary Woodhouse heard with astonishment of the possibility of their fervent hope being some day realised—how soon no-one could tell. After all, they thought, their letter must have had some influence, otherwise why had Mr. Denton taken it up. It was true it had not been delivered to him, but someone might have communicated its contents to him, for he had certainly taken a most effectual step in inducing the Government to take up the matter. However it might be, the subject aroused the curiosity of the whole village, and not only farming men, but blacksmiths, carpenters and shoemakers, were all keenly interested in the possibility of some provision for old age, other than out-relief or the Workhouse, against both of which alternatives, they had been almost hopelessly struggling for years past.

The interest was further intensified when it became known that Mr. Denton intended to address his constituents in Oatlands and particularly to deal with his own ideas as to an Old Age Pension scheme. The meeting was to be held in the village school—which had been obtained after some little difficulty for the purpose, and when the

evening came, there was a numerous gathering of Mr. Denton's supporters eager to hear his report of what Parliament would be likely to offer, to ameliorate the condition of His Majesty's poorer subjects. John and Mary Woodhouse were there, because John's hearing being impaired by age, he thought Mary would hear what he might miss, so that both were the keenest of listeners. Mr. Herbert Wright took the chair, and Mr. Denton had a hearty welcome from a crowded meeting, for their Member had certainly won their esteem by the solicitude he had shown in their difficulties and his interest in matters affecting their welfare. Even the farmers came, although not in agreement with his views on several points, yet they respected the honesty of purpose and sincerity of his character, while some were beginning to realise that, if village life were not made more attractive to the men, they would soon have a difficulty in finding sufficient labour to work their farms.

Mr. Herbert Wright had opened the proceedings with an expression of pleasure that there was a likelihood of an old age pension scheme receiving the careful consideration of the Government. He trusted its adoption by Parliament would not be long delayed, and that their worn-out toilers of advanced age would receive the first consideration.

Mr. Denton was quite enthusiastically received, for an Oatlands audience was somewhat stolid and lethargic in political matters, and it was evident that the village was on the tip toe of expectation. Mr. Denton at once aroused the sympathies of his hearers when he spoke of the utter impossibility, in many instances, for men with families to save anything from their earnings, to make provision for their old age, and of the pain which he had experienced when trusty and faithful men had been obliged to accept the shelter of the Workhouse, abandoning the cottage homes to which they had become attached by long residence. Then he proceeded to sketch out his idea of what might be done as an experiment to meet the obvious need, in the first instance. From each town, village, or hamlet, one or

more representatives should be appointed, according to population, to form a Central County Committee, to select persons, men or women, above the age of seventy, in the first instance, who were deserving of becoming pensioners at five shillings per week. From these the County Committee would choose, as equitably as possible, the number of candidates for whom the country had provided pensions, and as they became vacant, make further appointments. The most needy cases, character and industry having due consideration, would be selected, and though a very large amount might not be at first available for disbursement, as soon as it was found to be working satisfactorily, the means would probably be forthcoming for extending its area of usefulness. The pensions should be payable, with protective limitations, through the Post Office officials, who would make weekly disbursements, and the whole matter would be thus dissociated from Poor Law Relief and its administration. It had been said of some suggested legislation that it would make the poor poorer and the rich richer, but such a scheme would have a directly contrary effect. The poor would be less poor, because the burden of life would be lightened and their existence made brighter by the prospect of a bare existence in old age, while the rich, even if deprived of some of their accumulations, would feel satisfaction that their poorer neighbours were leading a less strenuous and despairing life, because of this provision. Thrift should be encouraged by making it possible to save something to add to this amount, and providing his income did not in the whole reach a certain amount, it should not affect his eligibility for the pension. Supposing, for instance, a man at the age of 25 put away a small sum periodically, in order that when he reaches the age of sixty or sixty-five, he may have an annuity of five shillings per month, his thrift and care would not prevent his receiving a pension of ten shillings, or if the annuity were more, being made up to an amount not exceeding fifteen shillings per week. In case of death before he became entitled to the annuity for which he had paid, the premiums

might be handed back to his heirs or successors. This would encourage thrift and would add to their resources at a time when it was most wanted, although it might not prove a barrier to the award of a pension. The same would apply to Friendly Societies pensions, those receiving them being eligible for so much of an old age pension as would make the income up to a certain amount. These tentative proposals to encourage providence and foresight, as well as to meet the needs of the worn out toilers quite received the approval of the meeting, who appeared to feel that a like scheme, with proper regulations and limitations, might be made practicable. Some of the smaller farmers suggested that everyone who liked to claim it, should be entitled to a pension, at a given age, but this Mr. Denton argued, would entail such enormous financial responsibilities that it would be impracticable, and would probably kill the whole scheme by its costliness.

Then Mr. Denton proceeded to deal with Small Holdings and the provision of land for industrious labourers who wished, by farming some land themselves, to add to their limited resources. He advocated tenancy on equitable terms, and that the local authorities, preferably, should be the owners, who would be required to let it to the labouring classes subject to their complying with certain conditions and paying the rents fixed. He hoped the time would come when a man of industry and intelligence would be able to rise above the position of an agricultural labourer, and become a small cultivator, at least during a portion of the year, when otherwise, he would be earning little or nothing. In conclusion, Mr. Denton announced that he had a great desire to make village life more attractive to them by placing under the management of an elected committee, reading and social rooms, in a small house in the village, where the papers and magazines could be read, entertainments or classes held for the improvement of their education, and various games provided. This, he explained, would be unsectarian and non-political in character, and all adults on the pay-

ment of a small quarterly subscription could participate in its advantages. He proposed to provide the rooms rent free and furnished, as well as to give them a library of books in addition. This generous gift was received with warm approval, and several of the men expressed their cordial appreciation of Mr. Denton's interest in their behalf. In replying to the vote of thanks proposed, Mr. Denton said that when Giles Day (whom they would remember had lived at Oatlands) gave up his work there and went to London, he questioned him as to his reasons for so doing. Giles told him that there was nothing save the Workhouse for his father and mother in their old age, and he (Giles) was determined that he would not follow such a discouraging life, if he could make a livelihood in London. Mr. Denton had then asked him what changes he thought would make him wish to go back to the land, and some of the ideas he had given that night were the outcome of Giles' replies. He trusted that if these improvements became practicable, it would make the life of the villagers more hopeful and fraught with that happiness which a beneficent Creator intended should be enjoyed by those living on this bountiful earth. The pleasure which was felt by the labourers present at the prospect of a more attractive village life was apparent and small groups afterwards discussed the ideas put forward by their Member. One large employer hinted, indeed, that everybody would soon be masters and that there would be no labouring men, though he admitted that they were willing to offer inducements for men to remain in the villages, the amount of available labour having diminished to a serious extent.

John and Mary Woodhouse went home with lighter and gladder hearts than ever before, and John even dreamed that night that they were the recipients of the first old age pension, for which Mr. Denton had casually mentioned, that they were the earliest applicants in that letter which was found in the defaulting postman's house, a knowledge of which, after all, had found its intended destination. But John, on waking up the next morning, realised

that Parliament did not move so fast as his dream had indicated. Indeed, they were beginning to learn that the wheels of the legislative machine grind slowly. Nevertheless, despair had, by this time, given place to a reasonable hope.

The *Extenshire Gazette*, which was published at the neighbouring town of Eastgate, gave a report of Mr. Denton's address to his constituents, and when this appeared, John, and most of the Oatlanders read and re-read the utterances which conveyed to their minds so much of hope and anticipation. Then they turned to the leader, which commented with intelligent appreciation of the broad policy advocated by Mr. Denton, and which was calculated to confer great benefits upon a rural population. The Editor of the *Gazette* was known to be a writer expressing independent views, and unfettered by the subsidies or ties of political parties. Taking a broad view of life, he was always ready to advocate those measures which promised to advance the welfare of the general community, and consequently he exercised an influence which was employed on the side of progress and justice. Old-established and with a wide influence, the *Gazette* possessed a power far beyond its own district, and enjoyed a wide reputation as an intelligent exponent of enlightened public opinion.

So that when the newspaper report appeared, a far wider interest than the comparatively few people at the meeting was aroused. Some gave expression to their views in correspondence, while others discussed the subject at the market ordinaries, but it was evident that, for a long time past, no such absorbing question had been mooted. Later, a discussion took place in the Club-room hall upon the social aspect of the question, the speakers carefully avoiding its political side, so that no dissentient feeling might arise. Those who heard the untutored and homely description of their experiences by village labourers, their difficulties, their inability to practise thrift and their longing for the "three acres and a cow," which originated the Small Holdings idea, were touched by the evident sin-

cerity of the men to improve their surroundings, and to leave the world better for their children than they themselves had found it. And they realised that, with the advocacy of the Press, which disseminated knowledge and fostered public opinion, even the villagers were able to make their sentiments known. No prudent Member of Parliament, who desired to retain his seat, could afford to disregard the earnest expression by a large section of his constituents of their desire for the betterment of mankind by the adoption and furtherance of wise and beneficial laws contributing to the advancement of the country's well being.

CHAPTER XI.

OVER THE SEAS AND FAR AWAY.

Gladys Denton accompanied her father to the meeting of his constituents. Not that she expected ever to need State support in the shape of an old age pension, though it might possibly prove to be the lot of some to become recipients who have never expected to suffer such reverses of fortune. But Gladys took an interest in her father's responsibilities, and when visiting the sick and needy in the village, she had seen sad cases of suffering and privation, so that she felt, like a sensible girl, if she could help to find a remedy, it was her duty to show her interest and even enthusiasm for it. In fact, although she had no desire to achieve notoriety, she had sympathy with the persistent Suffragists, but only to the extent of longing to be able to give her influence or vote, and to plead the needs of the poor when their strength was spent and gone. But, at present, she could not vote, and in showing herself at the meeting she felt she was doing what she could to manifest her sympathy. Harold Wright was there, and he was introduced to her by her father, who remarked that having completed his school nad college course, he was now entering upon fruit-farming in association with his father, Mr. Herbert Wright. Gladys, who only knew him by sight before, noticed his manly bearing and soon became interested in the course of education which he had been pursuing.

"I suppose you have just come from college?" she remarked.

"Some four or five months since, Miss Denton, but it was only an Agricultural College, not the University."

Gladys was curious to know what kind of knowledge he acquired.

Harold explained by giving a modest and epitomised outline of the practical and theoretical information which such a course of instruction implied, and expressed great appreciation of the interest the Principal and Professors showed in the students.

Gladys was much interested in his conversation, and after the meeting was over, Harold expressed the hope that she was satisfied with the success of the gathering.

Gladys replied that she thought it had showed unmistakably that there was a keen interest felt in the question of rural depopulation and the proposed remedies for retaining the villagers on the land. Miss Denton added that she felt very hopeful that the discussion would result in some practical good.

Harold replied that he hoped it would be found possible to devise a reasonable scheme. He had been wondering whether the Friendly Societies could be utilised in meeting the difficulty; indeed, some went so far as to say that it could not be done without them.

Gladys, who had advised some of the men to join Friendly Societies, so that, in case of their illness, their wives and families would have something to fall back upon, said the difficulty would be in some cases, at least, for the men to be able to spare enough from their limited earnings upon which there were already so many claims.

On reaching Witley Court, Mr. Denton invited Harold to join them at supper, and the result of the evening's meeting was discussed with a thoughtfulness and appreciation of the difficulties of the problem which left a pleasant impression upon the minds of Mr. and Mrs. Denton of the capabilities of their young friend. Mr. Herbert Wright had been a valued supporter of Mr. Denton in his

business and political career, and hence they took an interest in the son of a friend who promised to exercise a worthy influence in the village life.

Gladys' feelings were somewhat of a mingled character. Cyril Greenwood had sailed for New Zealand, and whilst she was under no promise as to the future, she felt that if his life and prospects improved, he would renew his suit to her. She would wait until she heard from him and then judge of her position. But was she to wait long years in uncertainty as to what he would do? However, she added to herself, it will be time enough to decide that when some Jack asks me to be his Jill. So Gladys dismissed the matter from her mind, though she felt pleased to have added to her acquaintances so agreeable a young fellow as Harold Wright, her father's young friend.

In the meantime, Cyril Greenwood had secured his passage to New Zealand, and was resolutely preparing himself to enter upon a new life at the Antipodes. Landing at Auckland, he obtained employment on a farm, and made his way into the country to take up his new employment. It was a hard and somewhat rough life, but knowing that he was now dependent upon his own resources, he tried to forget the ease and luxury of the past, and made up his mind to learn all he could of the possibilities of the district in which he was located, and the best method of cultivating or developing the soil. He had had a good education and with a better knowledge of manual work, he saw no reason why he should not reap some of the fruits of honest and intelligent labour. Possibly, the same energy and determination might have been similarly rewarded, if it had been applied in England, but a fresh start among unknown people made it less difficult to take up new methods and to profit by the experience of the past. However, some day, he hoped there might be some little surplus coming to him after the settlement of his father's estates, so that he could acquire a farm, and in time might persuade Gladys to share his fortunes in the Colony. At least, that was one of his day-dreams,

and even if only a castle in the air which turns out to be a phantom, yet it might help to buoy up a desponding worker, who toils on in the belief that, at some future time, his dream, by a lucky chance, should prove to have become a fulfilled prophecy. But, while he laboured bravely on for months and years, he did not send any communication to England, preferring to wait until he had really something good to tell. So Gladys and her friends were wondering what had befallen him in a strange land and among strange people.



CHAPTER XII.

HOW OATLANDS BEGAN TO ACQUIRE ALLOTMENTS
AND SMALL HOLDINGS.

The affairs of Sir William Greenwood were found to be in a most entangled condition, and it was obvious to his administrators that, for some time, they could not ascertain with any certainty, what would be the ultimate issue of this involved position. The encumbered property would have to be realised, and the Eagle Hall estate must be put upon the market. A farm of several hundred acres was announced to be offered by public auction, with other pieces of accommodation land, well situated near the centre of the village. The labourers at once realised what an exceptional opportunity presented itself of obtaining land for the purposes of allotments or small holdings. A preliminary meeting was held on the circumscribed area, known as the village green, or at least, all that was left of the common which once extended over many acres, but had later been gradually appropriated, under the Commons Enclosure Acts, to the great disadvantage of the poorer classes, who were once allowed to pasture the horses required for carrying on their business as hawkers or in like occupations. This open space was denominated a "green," although the young folk had worn it bare by their frequent games, until it resembled the African veldt more than a pasture. On this meeting ground the labourers assembled, and appointing a leader,

decided to go to Mr. William Denton to ask him to advise and assist them in the acquisition of Sir William Greenwood's estate for the benefit of those who earnestly desired to have a piece of land to cultivate in their spare time. The deputation accordingly met at the close of the meeting, discussed the points that they wished to submit to their member, and agreed to ask for his counsel as to the action necessary to be taken. For this purpose, it was arranged that they should call upon him at Witley Court the next evening.

Mr. William Denton, who, in the meantime, had been apprised of the intended visit of the deputation from the villagers, and the object that they had in view, at once felt anxious if possible to meet what he conceived to be a reasonable desire, and one that was worthy of encouragement. He recalled the remarks of his coachman, Giles Day, that life in the village was too dull, and that there was no opportunity of the labouring men improving their condition or adding to their limited resources by their exertions in their own time.

One has sometimes heard the expression, the "glamour of the possession of land." There is, in fact, a strange fascination and heart hunger for the opportunity of occupying land or an allotment for existing among rural dwellers. To the labouring man, it is too often an unsatisfied craving. The English Colonist in Australia or Canada will take a plot of bush land, and build on it the roughest of huts for his family, then clear it of scrub and stumps, a task that takes all the grit that a man may possess to accomplish. It is no light undertaking and the emigrant works early and late, with whatever help he can obtain, to overcome what may at first seem almost insuperable difficulties. What is it that impels him to such energy and supreme effort? It is the conviction that his labours will be ultimately rewarded, when the task is completed, by the knowledge that the land to which he is devoting his strength will be his own and his children's freehold. It is this privilege that the English agricultural labourer

desires, or, if not the freehold, the tenancy, with a reasonable security and at a fair rent, of a piece of land by which he and his family can add something to their small pittance in the shape of produce for consumption or for sale. This indeed, more than anything else, will help to make village life attractive and keep the better class of men at home instead of going in search of easier conditions in our Colonies. There will always, of course, be some who are idle, careless and improvident, but this is the case in every place of life, high or low, and such tenants would be required to give place to industrious men.

Mr. Denton gave a cordial welcome to the deputation, heard what they had to advance and discussed various points of detail with them. He then asked them to leave the matter in his hands, not to allow anything to transpire of their wishes which might tend to increase the bidding for the farm, and he would take advice as to the possibilities of its adaptability for the purpose that they required. Finding that the land was suitable for *petite culture* similar to that of the French peasantry, he made up his mind to himself acquire the property, if possible.

The auction was fixed to take place at Eastgate on the following market-day, at the Horn and Pheasant Hotel. A crowded room testified to the eagerness to acquire land, and after some lively bidding, it was knocked down to Mr. Denton's representative for over £5,000. The rumour quickly spread that it was to be divided up, so that the labourers and artisans of Oatlands might be able to occupy, on reasonable terms, an allotment or small holding. Upon this question there was not a little difference of opinion. One farmer expressed his satisfaction that the money to purchase the land was not to be provided by the County Council from the rates, as he did not think the ratepayers' money should be used for that purpose. But when it was represented that the land when divided up, would produce a sufficient interest upon the investment, and at the same time, tempt the men to remain in the villages, he felt his objections might be more imaginary than real.

A meeting of the labourers and others desiring land was called and held on the lawn at Witley Court, the attendance being larger than was anticipated. Mr. Denton suggested certain terms which would enable them to rent or lease the land on easy terms. To those able to purchase he offered to allow two-thirds of the purchase money to remain at a low rate of interest and with a small addition as sinking fund. In the case of occupiers, no sub-letting, sub-division or amalgamation of holdings was to be allowed. Cottages and farm buildings were to be provided, where required on small holdings, a sufficient addition being made to the rent to pay interest on the outlay. Allotments were to be let to desirable applicants, those living in the parish having the preference, and so long as the rent was regularly paid and the land properly and industriously cultivated, they might expect security of tenure, at such rents as would enable suitable men to make a profit. The terms were gladly accepted by the men, who were delighted with the prospect of spending their summer evenings and spare time, as well as finding out-door enjoyment for their wives and families, on their allotments or holdings. The greater part of the land was quickly applied for, and to celebrate the inauguration of the new departure, a supper was given by Mr. Denton to those men who were about to resume their new responsibilities.

Mrs. Denton and Gladys made the tables look very bright with flowers, and as they were well provided with viands, the men thought they had never had such a gathering since the days of the old "harvest home" suppers, when they used to celebrate, not always too wisely, the ingathering of a bountiful yield, after the last wain-load had been brought home to the farmstead. Unfortunately, in those days, some of the men would drink to excess and instead of retaining their harvest earnings for the privations of winter, their names would be found on the charge sheets of the Eastgate police-court, where the fine and costs that they had to pay for their ill-behaviour not only

brought their own village into discredit, but robbed their patient wives and their families of necessities that they much needed.

But Mr. Denton took care that this should not occur, and further, it was not to be simply a social gathering, for after supper, he spoke to the new owners and occupiers of land upon their coming responsibilities. He urged those who were employed to do their duty to their employers first, and to see that their master's interests did not suffer by their having these allotments, which were intended to fill up their spare time. Having explained in detail the system on which the estate would be worked, and the advantages that would be given to those who cultivated the land well, he expressed the hope that they would endeavour to show that they were capable of using this land to the advantage of their families. One or two of the men, in plain homely language, expressed their gratitude to Mr. Denton for the interest he had shown in them by placing the land within their reach and amid the hearty plaudits of the men, intimated the hope that their benefactor would never have occasion to regret the investment he had made. It was one of the most memorable gatherings in the history of Oatlands, and many a heavy heart was lightened by the prospect of a piece of land upon which to spend some of his time and energy.

The neighbours watched the experiment with interest and even critically, for some shook their heads and said it was a craze and would not last long, but that the land would be returned on Mr. Denton's hands. Others said it could not be made to pay, while a few rejoiced that, by Mr. Denton's generosity, the necessity for waiting until the County Council could go through the prescribed formula had been removed. Oatlands, indeed, promised to become a village in advance of its neighbours and surrounding hamlets began to wish that they had a like far-seeing benefactor in their midst. And no-one was more eager than Gladys to see the men started in their new enterprise, while Harold Wright gave all the assistance he

could to Mr. Denton in bringing his scheme to a successful issue, and working out the details so that there might be a clear understanding between the owner and occupiers as to what was required of the tenants. Some labourers who had found employment a distance away from their native place, even preferred to return to their own village, amongst their own kith and kin, which demonstrated to Mr. Denton the fact that the cry of "Back to the Land" was not without a significant meaning to those who had migrated to other parts of the country.

In other parishes, where there was no landowner to provide the ways and means, it was not so easy to meet the demand. Land was not voluntarily offered, the fear evidently being that the best and most accessible land would be accepted and the inferior land left. To put in force compulsory powers was attended with expense, delay, and sometimes even friction. In the case of the purchase of one farm, it was found that to cover the cost of fencing and properly equipping small holdings, the somewhat high rent of from £3 to £4 per acre would have to be charged, while to purchase the land, a still heavier charge would be necessary, making it impossible to offer the land at a reasonable rent, or one that would realize a profit to the occupier without imposing extra burdens upon the ratepayers. In the opinion of some, it was undesirable that the option of purchase should be given in the case of land which had been acquired by the County Council for allotments or small holdings, but that it should be held in perpetuity to provide the proverbial "three acres and a cow" for those who most needed such help, and not to allow it to pass again into private ownership. In such a case, the rent paid would be lower to start with and more easy for the men to meet, but as time went on, and the loan became reduced in amount, by still maintaining the rents at a uniform figure, the County Council would, at a later period, recoup itself for their outlay, and ultimately become the owners of the land when the whole of the loan had been paid off.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GREAT FEN FLOOD.

When Giles heard the hopeful accounts of the changes which were taking place in Oatlands, which information was communicated to him not only by Rose's letters, which he regularly received, but also by the reports in the *Extonshire Gazette*, he felt a great longing to see his native village once more and to spend a few days with Rose. Mr. Denton, in whose service as coachman he still remained, offered no objection, as the man under him was able to take charge in his absence, and the family were not then in town. Giles, much smartened and improved by his city life, arrived at Eastgate and was met by Rose, who had secured Mr. Denton's groom at Witley Court to drive her up and convey her and her sweetheart back. There had been heavy rains which had much swollen the great Low Level drain which carried off the surplus waters of the flat expanse around Oatlands to the sea. Consequently, there was a great rush of water from the more distant uplands to the lower level, and being unable to pass sufficiently fast through the Great Sluice which discharged the waters into the River Soar, a heavy pressure upon the sluice was caused by the accumulation of water behind it. But worse than this, there were signs that the foundations of the sluice were being slowly weakened. Though precautions were at once taken by the superintendent of the drainage system, and attempts

made to arrest this undermining process by putting in clunch and stones at the threatened spot, the water had already done its work. Forcing its way beneath the massive piers upon which the structure rested, the great sluice, with a crash and roar, as of impending disaster and wreck, suddenly "blew up," to adopt the description of the natives, and fell into ruins. Then the tidal waters of the Soar rushing through the opening and meeting the floods coming down from the upper reaches raised the level of the water in the Low Level drain to within a foot or two of the top of the banks.

With almost lightning rapidity the tragic news spread, which is so terrible to a Fenman whose land is drained by artificial methods, "The Great Sluice has blown up!" The unwelcome intelligence, fraught with impending trouble, travelled from homestead to village and from the villages to the fields. Serious and anxious faces, incredulous at first, but when it was confirmed, so alarmed, that men forgot everything else in the fear that disaster would follow such a calamity. The farmers ordered their traps out to see if any assistance could be rendered, men were called home from the fields to look after the stock, and their families were hastily informed by messengers of the serious position of affairs. Could the banks of the Low Level Drain, high above the surrounding land sustain such an enormous pressure as the inflow of the rushing tide would cause. The banks were broad and well "puddled," when constructed, but they were not intended to keep within bounds more than the fresh water which required passing out to sea. The sluice which prevented the influx of salt and brackish water was now in ruins and with every tide, the tidal water would rise to its normal height, threatening even to overtop the bank. If the bank proved unequal to the strain and gave way, the consequences would be too terrible to contemplate.

A man on horseback rode by with his horse covered with foam, and besought the farmers to send all the help they could spare—men with spades and faggots, so

that the bank might be secured through the night. "There is no time to be lost," he shouted as he rode on, "if the bank breaks your lands will be flooded."

The alarming alternative roused the farmers to action and they scattered right and left to collect all possible assistance, and to drive them in vehicles or send them by the quickest way to the banks of the drain with its swollen and surging waters. Men with faces blanched with excitement rushed to the scene, shouting to each other disjointedly the fragments of information that they had been able to pick up. They realised that the safety of their homes, their families and their farms depended upon what might happen in the next few hours, and pressed on to the rapidly filling drain, anxious to realise for themselves the probabilities of the mischief that might result.

Before reaching the foot of the bank, there was visible a trickling of water running down the steep sides, and some Fenmen, knowing that small beginnings may have great endings, set to work with their spades to carve out some clayey soil from a pit and stop the leaking fissure before it had made further inroads. Along the top of the broad, high bank, they walked, watching the swirling waters within a foot or so of their feet, and wondering what would happen to the bank. They could not help glancing at the fertile lands below them, and picturing the devastation that would soon be wrought, if the barrier should prove incapable of resisting the pressure.

It was at this critical moment that Giles had arrived in the village, and hearing the wild rumours that were flying about, left Rose at her father's cottage, and waving a greeting to Mrs. Woodhouse, who was evidently sharing the general anxiety, called to her that they were going to drive to the Low Level Drain and see how serious matters were, adding that they would soon return, little realising what events were in prospect.

Giles and Mr. Denton's groom, however, grew more anxious as they drove along and even the horse pricked

up its ears as if there were signs of an unusual occurrence. Men wildly shouting, orders being hurriedly given, tools being collected, as if no time were to be lost, and in some cases, even preparations for disaster. A dreary drizzling rain made the surroundings very depressing, and Giles almost began to wish that he had chosen a less troubled time to arrive in Oatlands and greet his friends. But, perhaps, he might be able to give help to Rose and her parents, if there should be serious trouble. He hardly dared to think of what might happen if the "floods were out," as Fen-dwellers sometimes described a periodical inundation of low-lying lands.

On arrival at the sluice, a few yards from the junction of the Low Level Drain with the swift flowing tide of the river Soar, the extent of the calamity could be better appreciated. The massive structure lay in ruins, upheaved as if some mighty earthquake or volcanic disturbance had wrenched it from its foundations. Rushing through the opening thus made in the sluice, the surging tide had carried away the adjacent banks and widened the entrance to a hundred and fifty feet or more, through which the swirling, eddying water rushed, sinking lighters and boats, sweeping away a bridge and threatening other damage. A body of men were being organised to patrol the banks and give warning of any indications of weakness, so that prompt measures might be taken, while the Commissioners, who were responsible for the drainage of the Fen, were holding an emergency meeting to devise methods of temporarily arresting the flow of water at low tide. As the tide was rising, they could only wait and watch, for no human power could stay or lessen the torrent. The gradual rise of the water was measured, the weakening of the tide was speculated upon, and when at last there was a sign that the water was beginning to fall, there was a suppressed cheer of hopefulness. But it was premature. The next minute showed a fractional rise and again there was a secret fear that the worst had not passed. Never did tide seem so long at

the flood. The tide in the affairs of men, of which Shakespeare writes, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune was not of this kind. But at last the waters fell, the danger was past until the next inflow, and what could be done in the meantime? Hundreds of sacks, weighted with clunch or stones were hurled in, but were swallowed up in the gulf and made little or no impression. Clay, stone, anything that would make a dam or barage, or even break the force of the tide were hurled into the channel by an army of labourers, directed by engineers hastily summoned to the spot. A rush of water may be a useful servant, but it is a bad master. It may turn the mill and grind the Fenman's corn, but when it sweeps along and devastates everything in its path, it is very hard to bring it under control. There was little rest that night for the workers. Large fires were kindled, mainly to throw light upon the operations, but were also useful to give warmth to the wearied and benumbed men. As the tide flowed in once more it was felt that but little had been done to stem the torrent, though the bank had been faggotted and strengthened, where it was the lowest and weakest. The weird light of the fires on each bank threw a lurid glare over an unwonted scene of hopeless and fruitless activity. That was an anxious night indeed, to many a struggling farmer and to his watching household.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BANK THAT BROKE AND THE RESULT
OF THE DISASTER.

There were many weary women sitting up in their own homes at Oatlands on the night of the day when the Great Sluice broke. Many a light was to be seen the night through in the scattered farmhouses and even in the cottages, a faint flickering oil-lamp told of the apprehensions felt when the tide once more rose. Giles, tired with his day's journey and the drive to the scene of the disaster, went back to the village and slept as usual in the cottage where he had spent his youth. His mother, though able to earn a little for herself, was dependent upon Giles, for he sent a part of his wages every week to prevent her becoming chargeable to the parish. Rose, too, was earning what she could, particularly in the fruit gathering season, so that she could eke out her father's wages and make her parents' old age fairly comfortable. So that these young people were prevented by their filial responsibilities from having a home of their own. So long as their parents lived—and neither of them wished it for one moment to be otherwise—they could not hope to earn sufficient to enable them to become man and wife. Giles felt sometimes that it was rather hard that the poor should have to make a sacrifice in this direction, of which the well-to-do knew little or nothing; but Rose, who was always optimistic, cheered him with

the assurance that he was showing his love for his mother who had devoted many years of her life to rearing and supporting him.

Giles retired to rest when the evening light had faded away, but expecting to rise betimes and see how matters were going at the Low Level drain. He had had his first sleep when he became aware of the clashing of the bell in the steeple as though giving an alarm. There was also a growing excitement in the usually quiet village street, and as he looked out of his little casement window, he saw people swiftly moving about, although the streaks of dawn were not even visible. He opened his window and seeing a man passing called out,

"Well, mate, what is wrong, is there any fresh news?"

"Aye, mon, indeed there is, the bank's broke and the water's coming throo faster and faster. 'Tis a werry bad job, s'y tell ye."

Giles dressed hastily, and knowing his mother's cottage was not likely to be in the flood, told her not to be alarmed, and then rushed off to see how Rose Woodhouse and her parents would fare, for they were on a lower level, and the water would surely reach them. When he arrived at the pretty cottage, overgrown with pink ramblers, the inmates were in a state of alarm, expecting that they would soon be flooded out. The furniture, such as it was, had to be hastily removed upstairs, and Rose, when she saw Giles, evidently felt relieved, for she said:—

"I am glad you've come, Giles, we hardly know what to do for the best. Father will not leave the house, and I'm afraid for our lives."

Giles had foreseen the possibility and promptly replied,

"You take your mother to my mother's cottage, Rose, and I will stay here with your father to wait events. Make sure of your mother being safe first. We can take refuge upstairs, and someone will give us a helping hand if we want it."

Rose obeyed Giles' instructions and took her mother away. As she went in the early dawn through the village street, she fancied she heard a noise of "the voice of many waters," and she knew that it meant sorrow and destruction to property. It was a hard struggle to live before, and she felt it needed a strong faith to believe that this calamity that was driving them from their home was one of those events that "work together for good."

Giles made everything as ready as possible and leaving John Woodhouse in his upper room, went off towards the broken bank to see what was the real position. He met an old comrade, who expressed his surprise at seeing him back at Oatlands, and narrated to Giles the events of the night. The tide had risen rapidly and driven along by a strong wind, the Lower Level drain filled almost to the level of the road on the top of the bank. The tension of anxiety was great, but it was hoped the bank would remain intact. A dribble some mile or more from the sluice was unperceived, the water drove its way through the perforated bank, the top caved in, and before any men could be brought together, a yawning chasm had been made, through which a seething rushing waterfall swept on to cultivated lands below. The alarm had been given in time, and no lives had been lost so far, but homesteads were flooded, stock had been drowned, houses inundated, poultry swept away, and corn stacks surrounded. The water was still swirling through, though the tide would relieve the pressure, and they hoped before the next one to fill up the broken bank.

"Ah! it means many a sad heart and empty pocket, Giles, I fear, and you've the best o't, I reckon in the big city."

"Well," Giles replied, it is a hard life, early and late, and though we have more coin to 'andle, it costs us much more to live, I tell ye."

"Ah," said the countryman, "all's not gold that glitters, I spect, but these are bad days for Oatlands, as ye must see for yersel. Things were beginnin to looke

a bit better till this mishap came, but now where we'll be, naebody can tell, m' bor."

"So be it," Giles said, "but keep yer pecker up, man. Yet must doo as we all ha' to do, the best ye can and trust it 'll come right in the end. We are all a short-sighted lot, old friend."

Giles passed on and soon came to the torrent rushing through the bank. Mounting to the top of the grass covered brink of the stream, he stood on the edge of the chasm and gazed into the roaring and tumbling water, apparently rushing with almost wanton eagerness to its work of devastation and destruction. He had chosen a sad day to renew his acquaintance with his home, of which he had often thought, when threading his way through London's crowded thoroughfares or streets. He would follow the course of the water, and see how far it would carry ruin in its relentless track. Possibly he might succour some who needed assistance.

The worst news is said to travel the fastest, and when the watchers saw that the bank was too weak to bear the pressure of the water, and that it must give way, every preparation was made for the coming disaster. Families were removed, the stock was taken to the higher ground, farm buildings were secured, everything that would spoil and that was removable was hastily carted away. But in the short time available, not much could be done, and when the cry came "The Bank is giving way, look out!" it was a question of *saue qui peut*, and the unfortunate people whose property was jeopardised had to leave everything. Some refused to do this and, in one instance, a farmer's wife took refuge in the upper storey of the house and expressed her determination to watch over her belongings, in spite of the coming flood. When, at last, the bank broke, and a great body of muddy foaming water tore through the opening a cry went up of distress and alarm at the terrible disaster which no human skill had been able to avert. Giles saw the water spreading over the low-lying lands, surrounding the stacks and farm

buildings, and with an inward groan of agony, ran down to John Woodhouse's house and found him busy making ready for the coming flood. He rushed in panting for breath, calling out to him,

"The bank's gone and the flood's coming; you must flee awa', John Woodhouse, or you'll be caught."

John looked in no hurry to abandon his home and expressed his determination to stop. "Naa, Giles," he said, "I'm not gaing to leave ma cottage after a'" these years, and I mean to wait for the floo'!"

Giles, however, dragged him away, and making the doors and windows fast, said "You leave it wi' me, I'll see no harm comes t' it long as I can help it. I gave my word to Rose to look arter ye." So saying, he led him away, and taking him to his mother's cottage, awaited the coming of the flood.

In the meantime, the dykes or ditches, which drained the land, rapidly filled and overflowed, while behind it came an expanse of water spreading itself over the fertile fields and the growing crops, carrying in its train floating timber and tubs which it had caught up and borne along on its surface, as it swept on its destructive course. Doors and field gates were wrenched off their hinges, fences were swept away, trees were broken and uprooted, and rain beginning to fall, added to the gloom caused by the melancholy spectacle. Hundreds of acres were now under water, and until the tide had turned in the river Soar the water must continue to flow on the land. How eagerly the adjoining owners watched the decreasing strength of the tidal flow, until at last it was seen to be ebbing. But no-one could tell what a strong wind and the next tide might do in driving the water still further inland. A vast lake, with an opening into a waterway, communicating with a swift tidal river—all the terrors of a Deluge of which they had read in the best of all Books, seemed to have come upon them in their cottage homes. They were at the mercy of the forces of Nature, and would human skill and engineering schemes overcome the diffi-

culty. They were in the hands of God and they could only call upon Him in the day of their trouble, to help them. John and Mary Woodhouse felt that their faith in the care and protection of their Heavenly Father was being put to a severe test, but Mary, with tears in her eyes, persisted in declaring that all things would come right in the end, though she might have been puzzled to have explained the mysterious manner in which so sad a trouble could carry good in its train. But though that was beyond her ken, Rose felt thankful that Giles had come down from town in time to help her to look after her father and mother; for at least, their lives were safe.

CHAPTER XV.

SAILING OVER THE FEN LANDS.

When the first signs of the undermining of the sluice was observed, Mr. William Denton, M.P., who was the Chairman of the Low Level Drain Commissioners, was hastily summoned and drove to the spot without delay. But beyond throwing in hastily cart-loads of material, nothing could be done. Indeed, so rapid was the action of the water that in a comparatively short time, the massive brick and concrete work, with the heavy timbered gates, rocked, swayed, and crashed as they fell into a ruined and shapeless mass. Here was a barrier, erected at a cost of some fifty to sixty thousand pounds, in order to withstand the flow of tidal water in the river, lying like a wreck in mid-stream, undermined to its foundations by the powerful and destructive inroads of a small stream of water that had found an entrance unawares. What must be done to stem the torrent? Material was obtained to construct some temporary dam which would, at least, in a measure arrest the torrent, increasing in volume as it flowed from the sea. All efforts were, however, in vain, for the force of the current swept all away and rendered the efforts of the sturdy navvies hopeless. Engineers were summoned from Holland, the land of floods, as well as the best talent England could furnish. Piles were driven in mid-stream, huge timbers were laid, and not until long battling with the tides, and an immense

expenditure of labour and money, was a great and substantial dam constructed, which prevented the flow inland of the water. It was an anxious time for Mr. Denton and his Commissioners, for the engineers, and for all concerned in grappling with the great problem. Even when a barrier had been placed across the mouth of the drain, the difficulty was not at an end, until a number of iron syphons had been fixed, by means of which the drainage water on the upland side was lifted over the barrier and discharged into the tidal river, and thus to the sea.

During the whole of the time that these works were in progress Harold Wright had been the confidential assistant of Mr. Denton, who had made him his private secretary for the time being, and, indeed, found his assistance invaluable in discharging the increasing responsibilities devolving upon him. Harold was frequently at Witley Court, and became quite a favourite with Mrs. Denton, for whom he was always ready to perform any service. Gladys, who most thoughtfully ministered to the needs of the poorer cottagers, driven from their homes by the flood, could not help admiring the efforts of Harold to relieve her father of the strain and anxiety that had fallen upon him. She, too, was feeling the effects of suspense. For weeks and months, she had been expecting that her father, at least, would have heard from Cyril Greenwood, as to his prospects in New Zealand, but no letter had been received. In fact, Gladys was growing impatient, and even beginning to feel that his professed love for her must be of little worth, if it could so soon be forgotten; and she was wondering how long it would be before Cyril would give any proof of the truth of his protestations of love for her.

Harold Wright found his visits to Witley Court, not only more frequent but increasingly agreeable to himself. Mr. Denton valued his services, and though his duties on his father's fruit-growing farm demanded his attention, he found many opportunities of assisting Mr. Denton in his correspondence and other private business. He fre-

quently saw Gladys, and while she was always pleasant to him, yet there was an abstraction in her manner which seemed to indicate that her thoughts were far away. Harold knew nothing of the reason of this, but Gladys, observing Harold's attentions to her, was wondering which proverb was the truer—"Absence makes the heart grow fonder," or "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." If Cyril really loved her, he would not have left her without a letter so long, and he could not be surprised, nor blame her, if she interpreted his silence as indifference. Still she was very perplexed.

Gladys' thoughts had been diverted by the necessity to look after the cottagers who had been driven out of their homes by the flood. But one warm and sunny day, Harold invited her to go for a sail over the inundated fields, an old boatman from a neighbouring town having brought his boat from the tidal river into the Low Level Drain, and steering through the gap in the bank was offering to take people for a sail among the flooded houses and stacks. The idea was a novel one to Gladys, and feeling that it would not be likely to occur to her again, she accepted the invitation. Her father, who was anxious to see, more closely, the full extent of the damage, entered the boat, and the old pilot skilfully sailed his small craft with the aid of a light breeze, through the maze of trees, houses, fences, farm-buildings and other "landmarks" which gave an unusual variety to the level expanse of water. Below the water could be seen the half-grown crops or the furrowed fields, while a gentle ripple on the surface caused the boat to jauntily glide over the familiar fields as though aware that it was taking quite a unique voyage. Even the railway line was under water, and as the train came rushing along the embankment, the wheels of the train were almost submerged and scattered the water on either side with a fountain-like appearance which quite amused Gladys. But it was a depressing sight after all, particularly so when they visited the old old lady who refused to desert her home, and lived for

some weeks in her room over-looking her flooded farm. A boat carried food to her upper floor, and supplied her with necessary requirements. Sailing up to within a short distance of one of the upper windows, Gladys spoke to the brave old lady,

"We have come to see how you are getting on, and whether we should put you ashore," Gladys said, smiling somewhat at her nautical phraseology.

"No, thank 'ee, Miss, I am not at all afraid and I wish to remain here like the dove in Noah's ark until the waters abate."

"Do you think," Mr. Denton asked, "the floods have done any damage to your dwelling?"

"Oh no, I hope not. I have been reading in the Old Book of the house built on a rock, though the rain descended, the floods came and the winds blew and beat upon the house it fell not." Like Noah I shall remain, I hope in my ark, till it rests once more on dry ground."

Mr. Denton admired her courage, and Harold bringing out a basket of fruit and eatables which he had brought with him, asked her acceptance of it. Having wished her a speedy return to dry ground, they sailed away and landed once more on the edge of the inundated lands. Mr. Denton went in another direction, leaving Harold and Gladys to walk home together.

"The old lady," said Harold, "must lead a very lonely life in that island of a house, day and night, do you not think so, Miss Denton."

"Quite romantic," said Gladys, "like a seaside holiday, with no responsibilities or worries, and seldom interrupted by callers, who have to keep at a respectful distance," she laughingly added.

Harold smilingly remarked upon the courage of the old lady in refusing to desert her home, "such a courage as was seldom seen in women."

Gladys resented for the moment this reflection upon women's courageous qualities, and added "You have not much opinion of the courage of women. With such in-

stances as Florence Nightingale, Grace Darling and others, one would have thought that they were not wanting when it was needed."

Harold admitted the force of Gladys' reasoning, but remarked that it was open to doubt whether the old lady was really showing courage or persistency in remaining to watch over property that was probably safe from dishonest people.

Gladys said it showed her attachment to home, the longing to maintain her right to her own freehold, evidence of which was to be seen in the present day, in the desire that men had to possess their own houses and gardens.

Harold assented, and told Gladys of the difficulty Giles had had to drag John Woodhouse away from his cottage, when the flood was approaching it. This longing for home seemed to be stronger in Britishers than any other nation. Even Colonials speak of England as home.

Gladys' thoughts wandered away to New Zealand, and wondered whether Cyril had forgotten all about his English home in his long absence.

Harold observed her reflective and abstracted bearing but attributed it to possible thoughts as to her own future. He ventured to ask her whether she preferred living in the country or in city.

Gladys replied with enthusiasm that she loved the country in the summer, the beauty of the trees, the fields—when they were not flooded—the woods and the animal and bird life in so great variety were always charming.

Harold's heart beat faster. He felt he had gained a point and pressing it a little further, he suggested that Oatlands had many attractions in its rural life, the richness of its surrounding lands and the value of its produce. Would she not always like to live there?

Gladys thought of New Zealand, and wondered whether Cyril would ever write to her, or come and fetch her to his homestead. She replied, however, that so long as her father and mother lived there, she would prefer to be with them, if it were possible.

Harold thought the moment was favourable for opening out those secret recesses of the heart to which young ladies of a certain age and possessing certain attractions often hold the key. He explained his position and prospects, declared his love for her, and asked to be allowed to obtain her father's permission to pay his addresses to her. This is the cold and hard summary of his declaration, though it was spoken with such depth of feeling and passion, that Gladys felt more than bewildered and perplexed by the position in which she was placed by Cyril's neglect. Her admiration of Harold's character, his devotion to her father's interests in a time of great anxiety, his straightforward and apparently sincere declaration made her feel that she could not trifle with his feelings so honestly expressed. But would she be charged by Cyril with being false to him. He had gone out to seek his fortune in order probably that he might prove his love for her, and months had passed away without even knowing where he was, beyond the fact that he had landed in the Colony. These thoughts flashed through her mind in the few moments that she listened to Harold. And when he ceased speaking, she knew not what answer to give him.

At length, Gladys speaking softly and deliberately, said:—"Your kind words have touched me, Mr. Wright, indeed, you have said much more than I feel to deserve. But you have put a matter before me which I feel requires the most careful consideration. You will, I am sure, give me time to think this over, and I will give you as early an answer as possible."

Harold betrayed some anxiety as to whether any obstacle existed to a favourable answer, but he at once acceded to her request and leaving her at the gate of Witley Court, pressed her hand as he said good-night.

"You have been very good to my father," she said, as she bade him "Good-night," and Harold went away with these encouraging words to ponder over, until a more definite reply was received from Gladys.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SCHOOLMASTER'S DIFFICULTIES.

The village school at Oatlands was styled a Voluntary School, although the amount of the subscriptions which supported it never at any period of its history justified its title. Perhaps the title Non-Provided School was more to the point, for although it received public grants, its construction and sanitary arrangements could not entitle it even to rank as an efficient example of a village school. But the fear of more rates, industriously circulated, as a necessary result had secured the opposition of landowners and farmers to the introduction of a School Board. So the villagers had to submit to a single school ecclesiastical domination. In addition to the Vicar, the Chairman of the School Managers, Mr. Denton was a member, the two Churchwardens, Mr. Frost and Mr. Clodd, and one of the farmers in the parish, Mr. Langley. Mr. Denton's duties in Parliament necessitated his residence in London during the season and he seldom attended, the Vicar and his Churchwardens thus exercising the practical control of educational matters. At one time, it was hoped that a School Board would have been authorised, and Grimm, the parish clerk and sexton, was very voluble while this crisis lasted in the village and interpreted some of the Vicar's statements in a way to which he might have objected if he had overheard them.

"First," said Grimm, "there's them raates. They're quite enuff naw, but I doan't beleeve in raates at all. What doo the loik of us waant with a Schule Booard? It's rootten, I saa', stuffin' childers' heads wi' such idees. Whar are th' workers for the laand and the sarvants for the missuses to coom from, if our childer are taught such foolishness? Let 'em be content in th' sphere it's pleased God to call them. The Booard School would drive out religion, the Vicar says so, and the childer would grow up a bad and ignoran' lot, I reckon. Naa caterchism, indeed! Sum call it dogmar, but naan of yer Dissenters for me."

This turbulent outpouring of the sexton's religious sentiments was addressed to a Nonconformist farmer, well-known in the village as a Primitive Methodist local preacher, who had gained the respect of his neighbours by his helpful and honourable life. John Welldon was no bigot, but he believed in the right to hold his own religious views and strongly resented any attempt to coerce him or his neighbours into any action that was contrary to his ideas of justice and right. He had been more prosperous in days gone by, but had been dispossessed of his farm in another county, because he had followed the dictates of his own conscience and judgment by voting against his landlord's wishes. Pressure had been brought to bear upon him to support his landlord's son, an irresponsible young fellow who had scarcely sown his wild oats, and when he lost the election, the landlord vented his indignation upon Welldon by serving him with notice to quit. He had to give up the farm upon which he had spent the best years of his life and invested some of his capital, with scarcely any return, for in those days, tenant-right was scarcely known and he had no remedy. His removal to a smaller and less productive farm at Oatlands was a sad chapter in his history, not only to himself and his young family, but to his neighbours who had learned to know him as their best friend and a defender of right against wrong, of the helpless against the strong.

Though he left his home with a clear sense of having done what he believed to be his duty, it was with a heavy heart that he began again the battle of life in a new sphere. And now Grimm's ignorant tirade on educational matters, and his denunciation of School Boards compelled him to disagree with this village luminary who seemed to hold sentiments that could scarcely have originated in his own mind.

"Well, Grimm, you have a right to your opinions and I to mine," he said, "but I have seen something of School Boards, possibly more than you have, and they do not, as you say they do, drive out all religion. The Bible is read, the Lord's Prayer is taught, and so far from the children growing up ignorant, they remember more than if they merely repeat, sometimes without understanding it, the words of a catechism or liturgy. You know, Grimm, we don't all think alike, and whilst you and your friends have a right to your views, you must give the same liberty to others, even to the Dissenters of whom you speak so contemptuously."

"Beg pardon, sir," said Grimm, who began to feel he must modify his outspokenness, but we doan't want more raates, master, de we? And these School Boards, our Vicar says, spend a heap of money, and eddicate the childers out of their station altogether."

"But, Grimm, said John Weldon, "you ought to know that the best thing we can do for our children is to give them a good education to help them to start fairly well in life. It is better than leaving them a fortune, and if we have to pay more in rates, we had better do so than have a badly managed school, and children unfitted to go out into the world, unable to take their place beside others who have had that advantage. I sometimes wish this religious question was put outside the school walls, then we could all pull together and give a good education in the public schools, teaching them our own ideas of religion after school hours. You could then teach your children the Catechism, which you prefer, and I could

teach mine the Bible or other good books. What do you think of that now?"

Grimm, with horrified look: "Law, sir, what not have the Vicar teach the Catechism in the school. Wadna they be just heathens. Them boys are baad enuff now, throwing stoans at folk, and they doant trouble about their duty to thar neighbours."

"Then," said John Welldon, "I am afraid you admit that with all their religious and moral teaching, the boys are not much the better for it."

"But," said Grimm, looking puzzled at this reply, "oor church is th' nashul church and the school is th' nashul school, and if th' nashun suppooarts th' church, it shoold support th' school as well. If the Booard Schools are built with public money, then th' catechism, the Vicar says, as how it shoold be taught there at the nashual oost."

"No," said John Welldon, we think the Bible should be read, but no creeds of any denomination taught. I am a Methodist, but I do not want any doctrines I believe in to be taught in the school, because some of the parents would naturally object. Nor do I want my children to be taught the Church Catechism. Either teach the Bible, pure and simple, or no religious teaching at all, leaving it to Sunday School, home instruction or other means."

"Them's not my sentiments," said Grimm, "I larned the Catechism, or how could I ha' been parish clerk and grave-digger. I dare saa yer may think yer right, but I must ga long wi' the passon, or I should get the sack, pretty soon, I reckon. 'E doan't like Dissenters intarfering about."

"No," said John, I have heard that in some villages, the parson has all the scholars taught the Catechism whether their parents are Dissenters or not, and if so, we wish we had a School Board so that the law of the country, which gives liberty to the parent to say if it should be taught, may be carried out. The parents

ought to be asked if they object to their children receiving Church teaching."

"Waal, said Grimm, harking back to his first argument, "I knaa this, none on us want more raats to pay, and if I tell 'em School Booard means moor raates, the foolk in Oatlands waan't ha' it."

"But," said John, "that is not the whole truth. If you tell them that the schools would be better provided and managed, and even if the rates were a little more, the money would be well spent, then they would say "We want our children to have a good sound education, even if we have to pay a little for it."

"Naa," said Grimm, "the faarmers tell me there's too much eddication now, and they daan't want the laads stop so long at school as they want 'em to work on the laand. They must ha' labour, yer know."

"So they can," said John, "if a boy works and passes his standard. But how will he maintain himself when he grows up to be a man, if he knows not the three R's."

"Ah!" said Grimm, "I think ye are right, neighbour. But it's as much as ma plaace is worth to say such perdition as that to oor parson. Naa School Board, tha's my text, an' I moost stick to 't. There's a new maaster got to be 'pointed soon, and he'll have a good time on 't, I reckon. But it's noan of ma bizness, howsomedever."

Grimm turned away chuckling at his smartness, while John Welldon felt half amused with the rustic sexton, and yet despondent at these differences which hindered the bestowal of the best of all inheritances to their children—that of a good education. And he thought of the Saviour's words, when he placed a little child in the midst of his disciples when they asked who should be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, "Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven."

Mr. and Mrs. Cross had been called upon by the Oatlands clergyman to undertake some Sunday duties, the former to accept the responsibility of a class, and the

latter to play the harmonium. These duties were undertaken with great reluctance, not that they were averse to religious work, but that they were at heart more in sympathy with Nonconformists, although they dared not declare their views, knowing that then tenure of office would be imperilled. There had been in the village a "stirring among the dry bones" in the Nonconformists of Oatlands, owing to the visit of an earnest Evangelist and a deep impression had been left upon the minds of those who had crowded the chapels to hear him. Quiet and subdued in manner, he yet presented the truth so attractively to the congregations whom he addressed, that he not only won their hearts, but he cleared the mists of doubt and unbelief from their eyes, so that they awoke to the revelations of the Gospel of grace. The schoolmaster and his wife, knowing the Evangelist personally, went to hear him, and were themselves so influenced by his winning words that they openly expressed their appreciation of the meetings.

It had reached the ears of the Rev. John Priestley, that the village schoolmaster and his wife had attended Nonconformist services in the village, and had avowed their interest and sympathy with the object of the meetings. Now, although the village school was nominally under the control of all the Managers, the Vicar assumed usually that whatever course he took would meet with their approval. In his capacity of Chairman of the Managers, he sent for Mr. Cross, and informed him that he understood that he and his wife were in the habit of attending Nonconformist services in Oatlands, and that as he was a Sunday School teacher and his wife took some little part in the services, it was a bad example to set to the children. Mr. Cross said he had attended lately some week-evening meetings held by a friend in a Nonconformist Chapel, but as his evenings were at his own disposal, he thought he was at liberty to go to meetings which were intended to raise the religious tone of the village. The Vicar seemed somewhat annoyed at the suggestion that the religious tone

of the village could be improved by services held in the "Bethels," as he termed them, and simply said that whilst everyone could worship God as they pleased, the continuance of himself and his wife as master and mistress of the village school must hinge on their acceptance of Anglican doctrine. He would allow them a fortnight to consider their position, and if they felt that they could not comply with this condition they might send in their resignations.

Mr. Cross tried to reason with the Vicar, and to point out that his attendance at a week-day meeting did not, surely, unfit him for the discharge of his duties in the schools, and he hoped the Vicar would not take this means of earning a livelihood from his wife and himself because they had exercised that liberty of conscience which was supposed to be extended even to the parents and their children who claimed it.

But the schoolmaster found it was useless to argue. They must either violate their consciences and declare themselves Churchmen, or resign their appointments and vacate their offices a month afterwards. Hard as was the alternative, they did not hesitate, and when the fortnight had nearly expired they sent in their resignations, anxiously wondering whether they would be able to find another appointment or whether the nature of the testimonial of character given to them would act as a barrier in other parishes. Mr. Cross had been a promising teacher, but his opportunities of entering training colleges, although they were largely supported from the rates and taxes, were much hindered, as some were termed Church of England Colleges, and required adhesion to its tenets, before entering them. Now a further difficulty had arisen, and it seemed to them that their future professional career would be imperilled unless they swallowed their convictions and declared themselves adherents of a Church with which they were not in full sympathy.

In their perplexity, they consulted Mr. Wm. Denton, M.P., whom they hoped would be able to prevent the

perpetration of an injustice, and he brought the matter under the Education Department's notice. A letter was sent to the Managers, but as the Vicar wrote on their behalf that the master and mistress were asked to resign on account of incompetence, there was nothing more to be said. There was great indignation in the village, but nothing could be done, and Mr. and Mrs. Cross paid the penalty of obeying their conscientious convictions, and were thrown upon the world unable to find employment. This preyed upon the mind of the schoolmaster, who was far from strong, and he fell ill with typhoid fever before he could vacate the schoolhouse. It was a long time before he could be moved, and during his illness Gladys had frequently visited his wife and taken her delicacies suitable for her ailing husband. When she heard the story of his ejection from the school, her sympathies were aroused, she appealed to her father, who explained what he had done to obtain an inquiry into the matter, and the way it had been avoided by the explanation of the Managers. But he would see whether any employment could be obtained for the schoolmaster that would re-establish his health and free him from his difficulties. This Mr. Denton was fortunately able to do, by giving him an allotment at a small rent with the promise of a small holding, if he could make it a means of livelihood. Both Mr. and Mrs. Cross were delighted at this prospect, and as Mr. Cross was also useful to Mr. Denton in other ways and could earn money in the evenings or when unable to be on the land, he soon proved himself worthy of a small holding and became a fruit grower, earning a comfortable livelihood by the sweat of his brow, with a happy wife and family around him. Needless to say, they looked forward to the day when doctrines and creeds would not be forced upon teachers or children, but that the true liberty of conscience which enabled all to exercise their own belief or judgment in religious matters, might be required in every rate-supported school throughout the country.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PERPLEXITY OF GLADYS.

Gladys went home bewildered and excited. She liked Harold and thought well of his prospects in life, since her father had spoken so highly of the help he had given to him. She would have had little difficulty in coming to a decision, but had she held out expectations to Cyril if he succeeded in New Zealand, that she would wait for his return? She would have liked to have waited until she had received a letter from him, for had he not promised to write? If he did not write within the next fortnight, she must then give Harold a definite answer. Should it be an affirmative or negative? In this uncertain mood, she passed a half wakeful night, and then, from sheer weariness fell asleep, and dreamed that Cyril had received an appointment to represent the Colony in England, and had returned to asked her to be his wife. When Gladys woke in the morning she found her dream was simply one of those flights of imagination which, however romantic, are not practical in the cold light of day. Feverish and insufficiently rested, she rose, and her father noticing her troubled expression, asked if she were not well. To which she truthfully replied that she had not rested as well as usual, adding almost in the same breath, "Have you had a letter from Cyril Greenwood, father?"

"No," said Mr. Denton, "I have not, and I am greatly

surprised that he has not written. I do not even know his present address."

Gladys thought that Cyril could not be very homesick, and she felt inclined to be annoyed that he had so little thought for her, after all that he had said about the necessity of her existence to his happiness and so on. She would consult her mother as to what she ought to do under these circumstances.

So Gladys laid the whole matter before Mrs. Denton, with sundry embellishments as to the difficulty of deciding between her two suitors. Evidently, Gladys felt not a little flattered to be in the position of making her own choice of a husband. She concluded her story by satirically remarking that it was not impossible that Cyril would take a fancy to some Maori chief's daughter!

Mrs. Denton could scarcely suppress laughter at this petulant and desperate suggestion, but she had made up her mind that Cyril Greenwood's career was not one which commended him to her judgment as a future son-in-law. Can a leopard change his spots? she argued, and it could scarcely be expected that in a Colony far away from home, he would altogether abandon his evil and wild propensities. Besides Gladys had given him no promise, she had only encouraged him to lead a better life, but that did not mean that she was to wait an indefinite period, until he should come home and present himself as reformed, and worthy to be her husband. Or, on the other hand, he might think no more of her or of them, and then, between two stools, she would fall to the ground. As to Harold Wright, he was a clever young man with good prospects, and if Gladys accepted him, she would remain at home, instead of having to go out to the Colonies away from her friends. Mrs. Denton, having summed up the position in this practical way, clinched the argument by remarking that she was by no means sure that her father would consent to her going out to New Zealand.

Gladys somewhat resented the idea that she was not able to make the choice herself, but she could not dispute

the force of her mother's counsel. Cyril might turn out to be a scapegrace and, as he was not likely to inherit anything from his father's encumbered estate, his chances of providing a home for her, were, to say the very least, remote.

But Gladys, convinced against her will, could not make up her mind what to do. Cyril was so refined and gentlemanly in bearing, used to London society, and would be more at home than Harold, a plain, honest fellow, but with country-bred ways. The son of Sir William Greenwood would be socially a better marriage than that of a country fruitgrower, she, at least, ventured to think.

Mrs. Denton, with a wider experience of life, was sorry to hear Gladys take such a superficial view of a serious matter, and pointed to the sterling worth of Harold Wright, as compared with the thoughtless career of Cyril.

Gladys felt that her mother was prejudiced against Cyril, and that if she had seen more of him she would have felt differently. If they had only known where Cyril was, someone could have written him and heard how he was getting on. She would like to wait a little longer to see whether any letter came from Cyril.

Mrs. Denton suggested that if she had promised to give Harold an answer within a fortnight, it would be only honourable that she should keep to her word.

Gladys replied rather petulantly: "Then I will tell him frankly of my difficulty, and ask him to wait until I can come to a decision."

Mrs. Denton: "In other words, that if you cannot find anyone you like better you will put up with him."

Gladys exclaimed heatedly, "Really, mother, it is too bad! Shall I tell him that it is your wish that we should be engaged?"

Mrs. Denton: "Not unless you have fully made up your mind to carry out your promise. No girl has a right to deceive a man wilfully, and Harold does not deserve to be so treated."

Gladys felt it was useless pursuing the subject, and turning it off with the remark, "Well, the fortnight is not over yet, and something may happen before then. Is that the postman's knock? Perhaps there is a letter."

But there was no letter from New Zealand. Only a basket of lovely blooms, charmingly arranged with a dainty note dropped into the middle, containing an affectionate message from Harold. Gladys was momentarily pleased by the attention it indicated, but later the bewilderment returned as she impulsively exclaimed—*sotto voce*—"How shall I decide?" And, in the meantime, Harold, unconscious of any rival to his affections, was counting the days when the fortnight would terminate and he might hope for a favourable answer to his proposal.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE NEIGHBOURING TOWN OF EASTGATE.

Oatlands and the surrounding villages radiated towards Eastgate, the chief town of Extenshire, and situated in the heart of the Fen country. Thriving and prosperous, its inhabitants thrifty and enterprising, it had seen many and varied vicissitudes, for it was an ancient borough, and proud of the charters and privileges which it had inherited from British rulers of the past. The Dutch proverb that "God made the sea and man made the land," implying that that country being below sea-level, depended for its existence upon embanking and efficient drainage, might be said to be true of the early history of the Fens. Indeed, it has been surmised that, prior to the glacial period, the Fens of England were united by flat land, more or less traversible, to Holland and the Continent, and if it be true that a not very considerable elevation would have been sufficient to accomplish this union, the sea between being very shallow, the conjecture is not beyond the region of possibility. When the Romans came, the Fens were an inland sea in winter and a swamp in summer, the more elevated positions, where the towns are now situated, being beds of waving reeds, tenanted by wildfowl and birds. The floods descended into this swamp, charged with disintegrated soil, which was deposited, while the water pursued its devious ways to the Wash. During the 400 years the Romans remained, they

made roads, undertook partial drainage operations and constructed embankments to keep out the sea, while, later, towns, villages, and ecclesiastical buildings were constructed upon elevated places or islands, where gravel or drift had accumulated. Twelve hundred years before the time here recorded, ancient writings described the river that went to Eastgate, for it was then one of the ports or gates of the East Coast. Even William the Conqueror had built here a Norman Castle to keep Hereward and his sturdy Fenmen in check, who for seven years held the fastnesses of this dismal regions against the invaders. Excepting the straighter channel of the river made to Eastgate from the uplands in the reign of Henry VII. there were no considerable works carried out until the period of Charles I. and Oliver Cromwell, when a famous Dutchman, profiting by his experience of drainage in Holland, applied like principles to this side of the North Sea. He, however, met with considerable opposition and difficulties, and died in poverty. A wealthy house came to the rescue, and with the help of a succession of distinguished engineers, the upland waters were prevented from deluging the lowlands, windmills at first, and subsequently, steam engines being employed to secure the more rapid discharge of the fen waters to the sea, which was also further assisted by the improvement of river outfalls, the straightening of channels and the removal of dams or obstructions of any kind. The necessity also existed for the strengthening of river banks, so as to resist any pressure from the rapid discharge of the upland waters, or "freshes," on their way to the sea, or the inrush of high tides from the sea meeting these discharges, while to regulate these forces, substantial outfall sluices were necessary, as the events of the last two chapters have shown. Tennyson has written of—

The little rat that borest in the dyke

Thy hole by night—to let the boundless deep,

Down upon far off cities!

So that upon the proper maintenance of banks and out-

fall works, not only its prosperity depended, but the very existence of its towns and villages and those who were the dwellers upon and cultivators of its fruitful soil—the richest in England, and made so fertile and productive by the alluvial deposits of past centuries.

Eastgate had received grants of privileges from Kings of England. Richard I. had given it immunity from certain tolls in 1170, and two centuries later, the establishment of the Guild of Holy Trinity led to the incorporation of the town by Edward VI. Previous to that, it had been ruled by a Town Bailiff and "Ten men chosen from the better, more honest and more discreet men maintaining a family." These City Fathers, if they might so be styled, met once a month and settled the public affairs, not always wisely, for it is recorded in the Borough archives that "the most best, wysest and substantiallist of ye said Towne were called with the Ten men to appease such controversies as doe aryse or growe betwene any of our neighbours, contrarie to ye dutie of christyans." They often exceeded their powers by extravagant expending of monies but there were then no auditors to surcharge them for their irregularities, so that they escaped the punishments due to their misdeeds. The Municipal Act of 1835 conferred upon the Borough a Mayor and Corporation, with all its dignities and privileges, confirmed by the subsequent charters of James I. and Charles II. On public occasions, such, for instance, as when the Corporation and public bodies combined with the Friendly Societies to arouse public interest in the objects of Hospital Sunday, the Mayor turned out in all the glories of a three-cornered *chapeau*, a scarlet robe edged with sable, a gold chain of office composed of links given by past Mayors and preceded by a silver gilt mace. Such days were suggestive of the mediæval processions or pageantry of the past, which of late have been revived to illustrate the municipal and ecclesiastical history of our older boroughs. The Town Clerk, in wig and gown, savoured more of the Recorder or Judge who presides at Quarter

Sessions of certain towns, but really like the Town Clerk of Ephesus, exhorts his Council to "do nothing rashly." For Corporations have, sometimes, even been known to dispense the public funds with less thought than their own resources. But "tell it not in Gath nor publish it in Askelon," such a calumny should never be associated with the borough of Eastgate, which was also a flourishing port. Its steamships landed upon its quays timber from Baltic and Northern ports, while corn, the produce of the district, was exported to other shores.

Taken altogether it was a prosperous, tight little town, and if its views of progress might be somewhat limited, in certain directions, it had made considerable advancement in its educational institutions and provision for the improvement of the social condition of its inhabitants. The borough had its record of men who had left their "footprints on the sands of time"—men of foresight or philanthropists who had helped to raise the institutions which had lifted men to a higher and nobler plane and loftier ambitions, whose deeds had been recorded by memorials or portraits, and even better, written indelibly on the hearts and memories of grateful beneficiaries. There was one institution which had been established by a wealthy citizen and a handful of working men, which had a happy influence upon the sons of toil, who were helped and cheered in their lives by its existence in their midst. Eastgate Institute was one of those useful homes or People's Clubs in which provision was made for educational advancement, healthy recreation as well as social intercourse, and the working men eagerly sought its hospitable roof, where they found reading rooms, library, coal and provision clubs, gymnasium, educational societies and various entertainments. Here men congregated in the long winter evenings, read the papers, smoked their pipes, or devoted their time to the clubs, friendly societies or other organisations, which, in one department or another, aimed at the amelioration of the condition of their fellowmen, in addition to making some provision for

their old age or in times of sickness for themselves or their families. Truly the rich and poor met together recognising their common responsibilities. When the late President Garfield entered college in America, he was asked "Are you going to become a minister?" to which he replied "I am not sure about that, but I hope I shall make a man!" Such Institutes help to make better men and women and assist in forming the habits and shape the lives of those whose opportunities of intellectual advancement would otherwise have been extremely limited. Mr. Denton had often visited Eastgate Institute, had seen its advantages and value in raising the tone of working men's lives and hence it was one of his ambitions that an Institute adapted to the more modest requirements of the village of Oatlands should be established in that parish.

Eastgate had, however, not solved the Poor Law problem in any better fashion than other towns of its size. It had a workhouse, roomy, well ordered and managed by a Chairman and Board of Guardians, who sought to make the lives of the aged poor as happy and comfortable as their restricted powers would allow. But there were no old age pensions, but few almshouses available, and the last refuge was the great House, where, on the barrack system, the days of its occupants were passed, it might be in the company of those who were not of their own choice and possibly not always desired. Some of the administrators indeed, hoped to see, one day a great extension of the almshouse system for aged couples or widows of known good character and industry in the past, old age pensions, with permission to add to them by small earnings, rather than a miserable pittance of out-relief, thus reserving workhouses for the nursing of the sick, the housing of the temporary homeless out-of-works, or as labour colonies for the idle and thriftless tramp. Some of the wealthier residents had indeed, made gifts of old-age refuges or almshouses, in which the aged poor were sheltered in the closing years of life, but they were too few in number, and it was not always the most deserving

who were found to tenant them. But happy were those who found in them a peaceful haven from the storms of life, and with snug rooms and a trim little garden in which to grow a few flowers, it is astonishing how healthy and happy a life can be spent upon a very few shillings per week. Some of Eastgate's wealth might have been well spent in increasing these refuges for the aged poor.

But Acts of Parliament notwithstanding, Eastgate suffered from the competition of an excessive number of licensed houses, and a restriction to the reasonable requirements of the population would doubtless, have helped to diminish some of that poverty which arises from selfish indulgence and prevents the wives and families from benefiting by the full earnings of the bread-winner. The removal of temptations to excess, the consignment of the idle, dissolute, and professional vagrant to some labour colony, but the extension of a helping hand to the unfortunate, whose families are overtaken by sickness or some misfortune, would help to diminish that tide of pauperism which not only Eastgate, but every like community, has to encounter and endeavour to mitigate. Nor could it be indifferent to the problem of the villages around the town, from which it derived some of its prosperity. In the winter months there were many unemployed, who during the summer were receiving large wages in its orchards, on the farms or on the quays of the river, but whose resources were exhausted before the severities of the winter were past. Consequently, Eastgate had shown much interest in the Small Holdings and Allotments question, not alone because some of its out-lying population sought to obtain them, but because it was believed that it would result in more employment being provided. Mr. Denton, in one of his speeches to his constituents in Eastgate, had told them that in Denmark, as an example, every thousand acres occupied seventy-three persons in agriculture, while in this country there were only half that number employed, an indication of the value of intensive cultivation, which the sub-division of the land had caused.

The enormous demand too, which had arisen throughout the country for butter, eggs, bacon, poultry, vegetables and fruit also offered opportunities that ought to be of immense value to the small cultivator, whose closer proximity to the markets should enable him to compete with the foreign importer. So that Eastgate hoped that small holdings and allotments would bring in their train some benefits to their population, and as to old age pensions, were there not honest and worthy toilers in town, as well as in country, who had deserved well of their country and needed some help when failing powers and physical weakness prevented them from securing even a bare existence?

CHAPTER XIX.

BETWEEN TWO STOOLS.

The arrival of the postman at Witley Court was anxiously looked for each day by Gladys, in the hope that a letter from Cyril, bearing the New Zealand postmark, would solve the difficulty of choosing between two suitors. But no letter came. There is no more difficult crisis in a young girl's life than when she has to decide the future course of her life, the tracks of which may appear to lead in widely different directions. If Cyril had really been successful in the far distant colony, he would surely have written to her to cheer her in her long waiting. He could not expect her to wait indefinitely without a word from him. She had given him no promise, and he—why he had forgotten her and possibly someone else had found a place in his affections. Pursuing these thoughts she became resentful of his neglect, and then, thinking of the toil and difficulties he might possibly have gone through for her sake, she would burst into tears that she had misjudged one who deserved a less harsh judgment.

In the meantime, Harold anxiously awaited her decision, and bestowed upon her many marks of his attachment which only added to her perplexity. Her mother observed her troubled demeanour, but, feeling that it was a test of her daughter's strength of character, and that the decision must be her own, she hesitated to use any

undue influence. Gladys had gone into the village on one of her errands of mercy to see Mary Woodhouse, who was lying on a sick bed, taking with her some soup that she had been preparing. On the way, Harold joined her and, noticing the pitcher she was carrying, offered to carry it for her.

"Oh, no, thank you, I am only going to see Mary Woodhouse, who is ill, and needs a little hot soup. I did not feel very well," said Gladys, "and the sunshine tempted me out-of-doors."

Harold felt concerned, for he saw that Gladys was disturbed and ill at ease. Evidently the course of true love did not run smooth in his case, but he could not solve the question where the difficulty had arisen between them. Until he had declared his love to Gladys, these perplexities seemed to have had no place in her mind. Could it be that her affections had been bestowed elsewhere to one of whom he had no knowledge?

Harold at last ventured to suggest that he hoped his proposal made to her when they were last together had not caused any change of feeling towards him. He had thought that she had reciprocated his suit and that she seemed to prefer a country life. Were the attractions of the city so great that she could not bring herself to living in the country with only occasional visits to town?

Gladys' face flushed, for such a reason had scarcely entered her thoughts. Should she unveil her conflicting feelings and tell him her difficulty. At first she thought it would be more frank and open to do so, and then she felt that Cyril's prospects were so problematical and Herbert Wright's so bright that it would not be wise to throw her chances away. Ingeniously, however, she replied, replied—

"Do you not think we are both too young to enter into any engagement yet? We seem to have seen so little of each other."

Harold thought this rather an evasive reply, especially as he had known Gladys for several years, although he

had been a silent admirer of her charming girlish ways. However, Harold spoke with no uncertainty as to his own desires, in which he said—

"No, Miss Denton, I do not think we are too young, and if any engagement were entered into, I should not wish to withdraw from it. Indeed, to me it would be a great happiness to know that you returned my love and would trust your future with me."

Gladys felt more bewildered than ever, but she was perfectly truthful when she replied—

"I have always liked you, Mr. Wright, and my father speaks most highly of you, but——"

There was a significant pause, and Harold looking into her face, anxiously asked,

"But what, Gladys?"

"Oh, give me a little more time to think about it. It is a serious matter for a girl to decide, and it is very important that I should be quite decided before we become engaged."

Harold thought it singular that this hesitation should have unexpectedly developed, but feeling that it was better not to press the matter at that moment, rejoined—

"Well, Gladys, think it over and give me an answer as soon as you have decided whether you can trust yourself with me. I am, of course, very anxious to have my suspense relieved."

Gladys felt she was acting a cruel part and was almost relenting, but the possibility of the arrival of a letter by the next New Zealand mail, which would make it easy to decide, influenced her to still maintain the reserve which her lover thought so unlike the cordiality which she had previously shown when they had met.

Harold left Gladys at Witley Court, and as he walked down the road he could not help still wondering whether a rival was exercising his influence over her, and when he came.

Gladys went to her room sad and distressed and longing to feel free to accept or refuse. But she petulantly

asked herself, was she to be condemned to live in the quiet village of Oatlands to the end of her days, with none of those insights into the gay city life which each season she entered into with youthful zest? Possibly some gay gallant with a prefix to his name would make her his wife, with a town and country house. She could, however, not help thinking of Sir Walter Scott's couplet which her father had quoted to her—

Uncertain, coy and hard to please.

O woman in her hours of ease,

In her desire to see something more of life in the city, she thought not of Harold's suspense. She wrote thanking him for his kind thoughts of her, but, for the present, she felt that she wished to be free, though she hoped they would still be good friends.

So Harold Wright, taking a fruit farm some distance away, tried to forget that Gladys Denton had ever entered into his life, and that it was only a dream that had passed out of memory with the morning light.

CHAPTER XX.

FROM CROWDED CITY "BACK TO THE LAND."

Giles returned to London from Oatlands after having spent a somewhat sad holiday. He had hoped that if Rose's parents had been fairly comfortably fixed, Rose would have left them to get married, living quietly in London until such time as the advancing years of her parents might necessitate her return home. But the disastrous flood which had driven the old people and Rose out of their cottage had prevented Giles from even suggesting such a possibility, at least, until they had been able to go back to their own home. The water was still lying in pools on the land, and even when these had drained away, the cottage walls would be damp and the ground saturated for some time after. So that there was nothing to be done but to continue his lonely life in the great city until such times as circumstances were more favourable for his settlement in life. He would, however, speak to Mr. Denton, his master, in the hope that he might be able to suggest some better prospect, for although he earned more money in London, and found more excitement in a city life, he still yearned to go back to the land and have his own plot or allotment to cultivate. The temptations for a young man in London were great, and but for the hopelessness of the prospects of his life in the country, he would wish to be back among his friends and relatives and particularly to have a home of his own,

however humble, with Rose to share it with him. If he could only have a few acres of land, in addition, that would be to him the most ideal existence, in which he could hope to live, "happy ever after."

When Mr. Denton returned to London for a short time on business and went round the stables, Giles asked him if he could have a few words with him at some convenient time and Mr. Denton, taking him into his study, heard what he had to say. Giles told him in a respectful way his difficulty, that he had felt obliged to come to London because of the smallness of his wage on the land and the hopelessness of being able to save anything for his old age, unless he had some other employment. He told him of his own aged mother whom he helped to support, and of his wish to get settled in life, but Rose Woodhouse could not leave her parents, to come and live in London, besides both he and she preferred living in the country if there was a chance of obtaining a piece of land or small holding that they could cultivate themselves and add to their income in winter or slack times.

Now, Mr. Denton, although Giles did not know it, had made inquiries about his coachman's treatment of his relatives, and the use he made of the money earned in London. He heard reports of him which were very creditable to his thrift, steadiness and good character, and he felt a desire to help him, to give him some interest in the village upon which his desires were centred. Although he would be sorry to lose him as his coachman, because of his punctuality and trustworthiness, his conduct in the village to his relatives during the flood had made him desirous of seeing him once again a cultivator of the soil. So after a few moments thought, he replied—

"I am glad, Giles, you have told me your mind, and though I shall be sorry to lose your services here, I have lately purchased a farm for the purpose of giving careful and industrious men the opportunity of hiring a few acres of land, and in that way, offering them some inducement

to remain on the land. Some regard it as an experiment that will fail, but it will depend upon such men as you whether the land is turned to good account or not. I propose to offer you at a fair rent five acres of land, with a cottage upon it, and if you and those who may help you, can prove that you are able to work it to your own advantage as well as mine, and keep the land in good order, the time may come when we may be able to increase your holding. But this will be only if your own industry and good management should justify it. You can also help my scheme by giving a few hints as to cultivation of the best crops to grow to the other tenants, who may need a little encouragement and assistance to make the best use of whatever portion of land they may occupy. My Parliamentary duties will take me to London during the summer months, but you can report from time to time anything which is calculated to make the scheme work successfully and with as little friction as possible."

Giles' eyes brightened at the prospect of a position of trust, as well as the lucky cultivator of five acres of land, and he effusively expressed his gratitude for the opportunity for which he had hoped for years, that of obtaining a settlement in his own village, which would give hope of better days than in the days of his father and grandfather.

Mr. Denton said, however, that Giles must exercise a little patience until the land came into his possession, and had been prepared for occupation. In the meantime, he could look round, in the village or neighbourhood, for someone who could take his position in the stables, and show him his duties.

Now Giles knew a youth, who like himself, was anxious to try his luck in the City, and had asked him to help him to a situation. He mentioned his name to Mr. Denton, who said he would have inquiries made, and take an early opportunity of sending for him when he returned to Witley Court.

Giles went back to his work in high glee at the antici-

pated change in his prospects, and as soon as his work was done, wrote to Rose two sheets full of news that he knew well would cheer her and her poor old parents in their trouble.

Mr. Denton approved the young man recommended by Giles and he was sent up to London to be initiated into the mysteries of piloting his master's carriage through the bustling streets of the City. Giles found him a willing pupil, and helped to show him how to discharge his duties with smartness and care, so that Mr. Denton expressed his satisfaction with the progress that he had made.

Giles was now free to return to Oatlands, but before doing so, Rose made a journey to buy the small quantity of furniture which they needed for their cottage. When they returned together, their first day was spent in making the cottage, which had been flooded, as comfortable as possible for the old people, John and Mary Woodhouse, to return to it. There was plenty to be done, but John and Mary, with Rose, soon began to make the garden look tidy, though the wild beauty of the creepers and flowers had been sadly spoiled by the salt and stagnant water in which the stems and roots had stood so long. However, when the warm sunny days came and they could work outside in the bright sunshine, they felt very thankful that there was now a silver lining to their cloud of despair, for at Giles' suggestion, Mr. Denton had consented that Rose's father, John Woodhouse, should also have for himself a plot of land or allotment to cultivate, so that with Giles and Rose's help, he could rear some vegetables and fruit, which would certainly make life happier and pleasanter to him than he had ever dared to hope.

There were great rejoicings when Giles and Rose quietly went to the village chapel and were married. Mr. Denton sent them a cake with which to regale their friends, and started them in life with a tea-service which Mrs. Denton and Gladys chose for them. This service, adorned with pink rose buds, resembling those growing on their cottage, was used with great care on the wedding

day, and then adorned the best front room where its beauties were pointed out, and its donors extolled by Rose when her friends visited her homely cottage. Here, close to her father and mother, to whose wants she could minister when necessary, Giles and Rose realised, with thankful hearts, what was meant by the phrase, so often heard, and conveying so much of happiness to themselves—
“Back to the Land!”

Mr. Denton had watched with considerable interest, the experiments made by a friendly landowner, and also on the Crown lands, in the direction of allotments and small holdings. He observed that a good system of allotments, with the possibility of getting on to larger plots and to small holdings, would probably indicate the man who was most capable and useful to retain on the soil. A certain proportion of landowners welcomed the chance of extending small holdings on their estates, if it could be done on economic lines, which would increase the return from the land in the interests of those concerned and the nation generally. One man by good cultivation and well selected fruit upon half an acre, was able in a few years more to buy five additional acres, and rent ten acres more until he had saved enough to buy those also. He averaged £54 per year profit for the first nine years, and soon placed himself beyond the necessity of an Old Age Pension. In the ten years between 1881 and 1891 there was a fall in the number of agricultural labourers of 117,000, while between 1891 and 1901 the shrinkage had been 177,000. How many of these would have been content to remain on the land, if the “three acres and a cow,” or even a small allotment, had only given them the hope of earning something to fall back upon in their old age. The average large farmer is surely neither hard nor inconsiderate. He has often paid out money to keep on men when he has been in doubt as to whether he could make ends meet and keep his account straight at the bankers. But if the State or capitalist can give a helping hand to secure for the small men their chance

of a living out of the soil, by the side of the larger occupiers, it will surely be an advantage to owners, occupiers and the country at large. Small holdings, rightly started and rightly worked, might be made to pay reasonably both the tenant and the owner of the land. When there are also good farm schools, the brighter lads in the labourers' family may be instructed to become workers of the type needed for this development. Co-operation in the taking, as well as the working of the land, would help to reduce the cost of production and the proof of it is to be found in its successful development in Denmark, where the Danish cultivator, with his forty acres, actually has his own telephone for 56s. a year, and thus has his finger on the pulse of the market in his own capital and in London too. With a far better soil, co-operative organization on lines like those of Denmark ought to secure a far higher range of profit."

With such considerations as these on his mind, Mr. Denton had started upon the experimental policy of inducing some to remain on the soil, by giving them an interest in its cultivation. Giles was to be the first of his new tenants and he felt some little satisfaction that one of his own *employés* who had maintained a good character amid the temptations of city life, should be the earliest to have the chance of improving his prospects in life. Would he, after a two or three years' struggle, give up his self imposed task as hopeless, and once more abandoning the country, seek the shelter of the populous city? Mr. Denton thought he would not, but that he would make it succeed.

CHAPTER XXI.

"A BIRD IN THE HAND IS WORTH TWO IN
THE BUSH."

The course of true love had certainly not been a smooth one in the case of Gladys Denton. Cyril Greenwood had won her affections, but had gone into a far country, and might be wasting his opportunities without any thought of her, for aught that she knew. To Harold she had not only given no encouragement, but had been the cause of his leaving the village, where he had been a friend to the working men, and an employer of their labour. Between two stools, would she, after all, fall to the ground?

Such were Gladys' reflections upon the decision she had made. Day by day, as she found no word or sentence which would in the least degree confirm her hope that her patience would receive its reward, she became less cheerful. Her friends hardly recognised her as the bright and blithesome Gladys who was the light of the village. There was something troubling "Miss Gladys" said the old folk whom she was wont to visit, and her parents noticed an unusual gravity and thoughtfulness. But Gladys tried to forget it and to resume her usual occupations, leaving the future to unravel her perplexity. But an unexpected occurrence happened which changed this purpose.

Harold Wright, finding a motor-car useful, mainly for his business requirements, often travelled to Oatlands to his father's house, and in the course of one of his

journeyings thither met with a somewhat serious accident. Taking a corner too sharply, he came into collision with a laden railway lorry with such force that he was pitched out upon the hard macadamised road, and picked up in an unconscious condition. As it happened very near to Witley Court, he was taken into the house, Mr. Denton sending off for a doctor at once, and using every means to ascertain the nature of his injuries. Dr. Berry found him suffering from concussion of the brain, but no bones were broken. It was some hours before he returned to consciousness, and he was not a little astonished to find himself under the roof of Mr. Denton, who had always been most kind to him. Instructions were given by Dr. Berry that he was to be kept absolutely quiet, and he would not permit of his removal to his father's house until all danger of the excitement that might follow was passed. Harold, of course, wondered whether in the time that he had been living away from Oatlands, Gladys' feelings had undergone a change, but Mrs. Denton and a trained nurse were only in attendance upon him and nothing that was said, gave him any hope that she would encourage his suit. He was still as devoted as ever to her, and in the confidence that he would be able to win her, he had decided to bide his time, and in his solitude had been laboriously consolidating and improving his business so that he could offer her a worthy home, with some of those comforts that she enjoyed at Witley Court.

However, when he had recovered sufficiently to justify removal, he was taken in Mr. Denton's carriage to his father's house, having expressed his great indebtedness to his kind friends for their thoughtful care and nursing. Even Gladys, before he was helped into the carriage, stepped forward and, as he thought, in the most delightful and considerate way, asked him if he was feeling better, and hoped he would soon be fully recovered from his unfortunate accident. Could it be that she was beginning to regret her decision and that the grave and thoughtful look which he had been told she had recently borne, was

a hopeful sign. The thought of its possibility excited him and when he arrived home, the feverish symptoms necessitated a further period of quiet and rest. The days seemed long to an active and restless man of business, but at last he was able to walk abroad and visit his father's farms. In the course of one of his strolls, he met Gladys, who felt obliged to make inquiries after his progress.

"I feel stronger and better, Miss Denton, thanks to the very kind attention and care which I received from Mr. and Mrs. Denton, and which I shall never forget."

"I am sure it was a pleasure to both my father and mother to render any such service," said Gladys simply and naturally "for they always think so highly of you, and you could not have fallen into more willing hands."

"I could not have been more fortunate than to be nursed back to comparative health in your home and it adds one more to the kindnesses received from your family at Witley Court. There is another happiness that I hope may yet be realised, and that is in your power to confer."

Gladys felt the colour rushing to her face. Here was a man of irreproachable life, having before him a prosperous future, who was evidently devotedly attached to her and whom her father and mother held in the highest regard. Cyril must have forgotten her, and if not, his indifference deserved no consideration from her. She began to feel annoyed that she had been neglected by Cyril and to realise that Harold's devotion was drawing her to him. Would not all her troubles be solved if she accepted Harold's suit?

It was a critical moment. Harold saw her hesitation and almost passionately urged her to trust herself with him, and he would endeavour to make her life so happy that she would not regret her decision.

Gladys, after a few minutes' pause, replied: "Let me be perfectly candid with you, Mr. Wright. I have had another suitor in my thoughts, and whilst I have always liked and admired you, I have felt that unless I

really cared for you, I could not give you the encouragement you sought. Your devotion to me and the knowledge that our sympathies will be largely in harmony, have made me feel that I cannot any longer withhold my consent."

"Then," said Harold eagerly, "you trust yourself with me, Gladys?"

"I do," simply replied Gladys, relieved at having come to a decision which she knew would meet with her parents approval.

Harold, linking his arm with that of Gladys, exclaimed, "You have made me happier than I can tell you, Gladys, now that I can make a home where we can live happily."

Gladys left Harold at the gate of Witley Court, and, going to her own room, she sat down to think. Had she done right? Harold was a worthy fellow, and would make her happy—of that she felt assured. But would Cyril upbraid her for her inconstancy? It was his own fault. He should have written, as he had promised to do.

Harold soon became strong, but he hovered about Witley Court longer than his health really needed. Gladys resumed her bright and cheerful demeanour, for it was evident that she had fully made up her mind that she would marry Harold, and that "a bird in the hand" was after all, "worth two in the bush."

CHAPTER XXII.

WINTER EVENINGS AND THE VILLAGE
INSTITUTE.

Mr. Denton did not forget that Giles Day, when he referred to the unattractiveness of village life spoke of the desirability of providing a Social Institute or Reading-room, where the artisans and labourers could profitably and agreeably spend their evenings. In many country places young men are found spending their leisure hours in idleness or undue drinking, which dull their brains, waste a working man's money, as well as his opportunities for improvement. Oatlands had several public-houses, more, indeed, than the population required, and some of the villagers appeared at the police-court more often than Mr. Denton liked. In the long winter evenings, the temptations of a bright fire and the desire to hear the news of the day, which were freely discussed in the village inn parlour, tempted the men to assemble there, and to order something "for the good of the house," but not always for the good of the consumer, particularly, as was often the case, he became quarrelsome and noisy. Then there were brawls, the landlord became afraid his licence would be endangered, and either himself turned the noisy customer out of the house, or called in the aid of the police to restore order lest he should be summoned for permitting drunkenness. Possibly, the matter would be hushed up, for the publicity of the police-court was feared, and also

brought down upon the publicans the censure of the brewers. If the case had to be taken into court, the offending customer was generally punished, but as to the publican causing the mischief by serving him beyond prudent limits, the following colloquy would take place:—

Publican giving evidence of the refusal of defendant to leave the Plough Inn, is asked some questions by the Justices, whether the defendant was intoxicated.

Landlord: Oh, noa, yer honors, he had only had a little beer. He was able to walk.

The Chairman: Was he the worse for drink?

Landlord: O, noa, certainly not; he was not drunk but only got argyfyng.

The Chairman: How much beer did you serve him with?

Landlord: I only served him with a pint and 'arf, yer Honor.

The Chairman: Did anyone else serve him?

Landlord: My wife might have served him with more, but I did not see it.

The Chairman: Where is your wife?

Landlord: She is at home minding the house.

The Superintendent of Police remarks that the house has not had any complaint against it since the present tenant had been there (about six months), and so the labourer is fined 5s. and costs, and the landlord goes away, conscious that his customer has paid the penalty, and that he has escaped. Tied to sell the beer of a certain brewer, often purchased at a higher price than he would pay if he were free to buy where he chose, he has around him so many houses ready to sell the drink, that he is afraid he will be turned out of his home if he does not sell sufficient. But if he oversteps the mark, he must either get the poor drunken man away before rowdyism occurs, or call in the police to show his desire to keep his house orderly. Between his brewers and the police-court, no wonder he is sometimes discontented with his position. Fewer houses mean fewer temptations, and while the

poor besotted men waste their hard earned money, the root of the mischief is scarcely touched.

Mr. Denton had formed the opinion that enlightened effort should be concentrated on the endeavour to meet the recreative needs of the people, and that temperance reform was largely allied with the question of the provision of recreation and amusements. Lord Randolph Churchill once said that the temptations open to a working man in the villages required a counter attraction, where the toiler can seek refuge from the cramped and often cheerless surroundings of his own dwelling, and where he might employ his hours of leisure in winter.

The provision of a Village Institute or Reading-room had often been a subject of discussion between Mr. Denton and Harold, the former desiring to enlist the interest of his young friend in a scheme which had been developing in his mind for the meeting of this obvious need. He proposed that Giles Day should, in consideration of a fair allowance made upon his rent, appropriate a front sitting-room to the purposes of a village reading-room, which should be open after working hours in the evening, and furnished under the guidance of a committee with newspapers, periodicals, or books of a useful character.

These young folk, Giles and Rose, were delighted to fall in with such an idea, for it would not only lighten their expenses, but it gave Giles the opportunity of showing that such a provision would be a real help to his fellow-workers, and would greatly add to the opportunities of meeting socially and improving their knowledge by the comparison of their ideas. So it was decided that a meeting should be called, of those interested, in Giles' front room, to discuss the pros and cons of a Village Reading-room. When the time came, the room was quickly filled, some having to stand in the passages, while Mr. Denton explained his proposal. Several of the men gave their opinions, or asked questions, with the result that it was unanimously decided that a reading-room should be opened. Mr. Denton was chosen President, the Vicar

and the Free Church Minister were appointed Vice-Presidents, and Mr. Harold Wright became secretary. To inaugurate the effort a village tea, given by Mr. Denton, took place in the schoolroom, to which men likely to assist the entertainment were invited, and this was followed by speeches from Mr. Denton, the Vicar, and the Nonconformist minister upon the best and broadest lines of its constitution. No political, party or religious discussions were to be allowed, all were to sink their differences and meet on friendly terms, and it was to be managed by a committee of working-men, elected by the members at their annual meeting. The names of members were taken, and a special meeting was arranged to be called to elect a committee of five, in addition to the officers. The choice of this committee was a great event and caused quite a hubbub of excitement. There was to be no party feeling or colours, but the most prudent and level-headed men were to be chosen to inaugurate the Oatlands Village Institute.

Mr. Denton came from London specially to be present at the election meeting, and nominations were made of five suitable men, the farmer, John Welldon, the village carpenter, Tom Plane, the small holder, Giles Day, the allotment occupier, John Woodhouse, and the blacksmith, William Forge. The old sexton, Grimm, was also named, but he grumpily withdrew, intimating his views were "the same as the parson's, who was a 'hossifer' already." So the five good men were elected a committee and everyone seemed satisfied.

Contributions of papers, magazines and books were forthcoming, and on one evening in each week a "talk" on some announced subject was to take place, to last one hour only. Mr. Denton was to talk about "Village Institutes," the Vicar would discourse upon "Reading of Books," the Free Church Minister upon "A Summer Holiday," and Mr. Harold Wright upon "Coal Clubs." Part of the time was to be given to conversation, and the talks were to be simple and to the point. Announcee-

ments were to be placed on the board outside, so that all might know of what arrangements were made.

Giles Day's small room was soon crowded the first night, and although superfluous furniture was removed, there was barely enough room. Everyone thought and some said that this interest would soon slacken and that the room would accommodate all after the first rush was over. Even village people, like the Athenians of old, were supposed to be eager for something new, and that their ardour would cool. But it did not, and it was not long before the village school had to be used, for Giles wishing to see the enterprise succeed used to run out into the village street and almost compel the idlers to come in. Rose kept a bright fire and a clean hearth, while Giles pointed out interesting pictures or pieces in the papers and magazines, until even the village loafers began to feel a real pride in their own snug little "evening parlour."

No one was more delighted than Harold Wright that the scheme had been so well supported, and the next time he saw Mr. Denton, he suggested to him that the time was coming when they would want more accommodation for their members, while a room for games and smoking, as well as the reading-room would be popular.

"All in good time," said Mr. Denton, "when the novelty wears off, even our energetic caretaker, Giles Day, may not be able to drag them in, like the wary spider catching his fly."

But Giles did not lose his influence nor relax his efforts, and the room was the most popular place in the village, so attractive and bright was it made to appear. The women were delighted, for the men became more sober, more kind and considerate, and handed their money to their wives for the benefit of their children, who were better fed and rosier than ever before. Sometimes, when there was a concert or entertainment, the wives joined their husbands and had "a real good time" as they called it, for a little music and humour helped to brighten the

monotony and drudgery of their lives and made them forget for a while their little worries and troubles. Then there were the Coal and Clothing Clubs which helped wonderfully to keep themselves and their families comfortable in the bitter days of winter. Allotments and small holdings on summer evenings, and the village reading-room in the winter—surely Oatlands was moving with the times. Farmer Langley even said that the men were more contented and willing to stay on, while there were less difficulty in finding men of the steady sort. That was a testimony that Giles Day rejoiced to hear, and both he and his old father-in-law, John Woodhouse, thanked God that things were looking up in their village, although old age pensions were not yet available. Mary Woodhouse once more declared that all things had indeed worked together for good, and that their children, Rose and Giles, had greatly helped to brighten their lives in their declining years.

As to Mr. Denton and Mr. Herbert Wright, they were so pleased with the outcome of their plans to help along the villagers, that they presented a small but well-selected library of books to the Village Institute, so that the families in the homes or their members could share its educational benefits. They appointed the former village schoolmaster (who had since become a small holder) as the librarian, and when Mr. Cross invited the allotment and small holders to hear him lecture on the best system of cultivating their little fruit or vegetable "farm," he pointed out the books in the library which would help them to learn still more.

Oatlands soon came to the conclusion that the Village Institute would make their working population into better men and women, because they were brought under happy influences and assisted to usefully employ their leisure time. Its usefulness grew, its accommodation became enlarged, and other villages looked with longing eyes for a like benefit to be extended to their own borders.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CYRIL'S EXPERIENCES IN THE COLONIES.

In the meantime, Cyril had passed through varied experiences, since he had left Oatlands to seek his fortune at the Antipodes. He had gone up country in the hope that he might find land which he could obtain at a low price and by clearing and cultivating it, acquire a footing in the Dominion of New Zealand. But his past life ill-fitted him for the privations he was called upon to suffer in that far-off colony. Hard toil, a different climate, the change from an idle and luxurious life, added to the effects of the indulgences of his youth, began to tell upon him so seriously, that his enfeebled constitution broke down. Fever prostrated him, and but for the kindness of an English settler and his wife in this lonely region, he might have died unknown to anyone. That sympathy and help which are often so generously extended to the unfortunate, in a distant land, happily came to the lot of Cyril. When his life hung in the balance for weeks, the devotion of his kind benefactors, and the fact that the settler's wife had received a training as a hospital nurse, contributed to his ultimate recovery, although it left him in a weakened and impoverished state of health. The worthy people who had befriended him would not hear of him leaving them, and finding him light work on the farm, they amiably represented that by so doing he was repaying them for his maintenance, which

Cyril Greenwood could not but feel was a far more liberal estimate of the value of his poor services than he could possibly admit. But supplies of money, which he received from home, enabled him to show his gratitude in a small measure, and he remained with them until his strength fitted him for more active work. The settler, by this time, had become so interested in Cyril, that he urged him to stay, offering to assist him in obtaining land, so that they could work their farms side by side and help one another. Cyril, who increasingly felt the difficulties he might have to encounter in his pioneer work in an unknown country, and also anxious to further show his appreciation of his benefactors' kindness, readily accepted the proposal, and did his utmost to earn their good opinion and esteem by his industry and thoughtfulness for their welfare, as well as seeking his own advancement.

During this time of trouble and anxiety, Cyril had not sent a letter to England. He had written one, but left it in his desk, at the time he was seized with illness, and found it there long afterwards. He had nothing at that time, ill as he then was, to tell his friends that would relieve them of anxiety and he would wait, he thought, until he was fully recovered and had something in prospect that would inspire them with hope for his future. So time went on, until he received an intimation from his solicitors in London that they required his presence in England, upon business of importance, also enclosing him a cheque to cover his expenses. Cyril wondered what should require his return home, but his friends arguing that the voyage would help him to regain strength, urged him to start at once, promising to welcome him back. Cyril had heard very little about the settlement of his father's affairs, and hoping that he might not only see Gladys once more, but tell her of his reasons for his silence, he set sail from Auckland homeward bound. On the journey home he met with some colonists who had left England twenty-five years before, and were now for the first time returning to their "home"—as they still called

it—taking with them their daughter, a handsome girl whose musical attainments made her the admiration of all on board. But Cyril thought only of Gladys, and whilst he reproached himself for his long silence, he cherished the hope that she would wait until he had had a chance to make a start in New Zealand to offer her a home.

As the vessel drew near to the shores of old England he eagerly watched for the first sight of land, wondering what better fortune was in store for him or whether he would return to the colony he had left. On landing, he proceeded to his solicitors in London, and there learned that, by converting his father's factories into limited liability companies, a larger sum had been realised for them than had been expected, and even after meeting the heavy claims on the estate, there was still a balance left which would provide for him a comfortable competency if he chose to remain in England, or enable him to purchase a farm in New Zealand without incurring any liabilities to his friends he had left behind. Cyril felt his journey had indeed been so far attended with most happy consequences, and having transacted necessary business, he travelled to Oatlands, wondering whether fortune would also favour him there, as it had done in London. When he learned by a casual conversation with a stranger in the train that Oatlands was preparing to celebrate the wedding of Harold Wright to Mr. Denton's daughter, he turned so pale and seemed so disconcerted that his informant inquired if he were unwell, but he threw off suspicion by explaining that he was only recovering from a long illness and that the journey had fatigued him. The remainder of the distance he sat, brooding and melancholy, thinking of his foolishness in not writing home. Gladys, despairing of seeing him again, had, of course, taken the chance offered to her of remaining among her kith and kin, instead of migrating with him to the Colonies. He could not reproach her. He had been foolish, inconsiderate, neglectful, and this was one more of the chances in life he had missed. The question now was—what

should he do? Should he return to London and bury himself in the excitement of city life, forgetting as far as he could, his deep disappointment. No, he would see her once more, he would disguise himself, and be an unrecognised spectator of the ceremony.

He passed a restless night, staying at the hotel at Eastgate, where he heard the preparations being made for the wedding of Gladys, on the morrow. What reproaches he heaped upon himself for his neglect to even communicate with Gladys. He pictured to himself her waiting for some news of whether he would ever come back to offer her a home, either in England or New Zealand, and, finally, in despair of ever hearing of him again, her acceptance of the attentions of Harold, who was probably more worthy of her than he was. And yet he knew that Gladys had cared for him, and he could not bear the thought that anyone else should have stolen away her affection. But it was his own folly that was alone to blame. Like the prodigal son, he had wasted his opportunities. He had spent his youth in "sowing his wild oats," and he was reaping the fruits of his foolish ways. It had weakened his constitution, had left him comparatively a wreck, while Harold, successful in business and trying to help those around him, was far more deserving of Gladys than he could hope to be.

In this despondent mood, he almost felt constrained to return to London, where no-one would know him and his thoughts would be diverted from his own unhappy lot. But no! he would see Gladys married. He would disguise himself as effectually as he could, and go as a stranger just to take one more look at the woman he had loved and lost. As Tennyson had said—

'Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.

He wondered what changes would time have wrought. Was she as fair and radiant as ever? He would see and judge for himself.

So hastily breakfasting, he disguised himself as well as he could and set forth for Oatlands. On the way, he assumed a false moustache he had once used in some theatricals, and pulling his hat over his eyes, he made his way, past the triumphal arch, upon which an inscription wished happiness to the bride and bridegroom—ah, would that it had been his lot instead of Harold—and under the fluttering flags to the chapel in which the ceremony was already proceeding. But the gay scene brought no brightness to his eyes. He had a heavy heart, for he was as a man that had not on the wedding garment.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WEDDING DAY AT OATLANDS.

Harold Wright had soon found that his fruit farming was prospering and that he was in a position to ask Gladys to fix their wedding day. Gladys, at first, hesitated, and suggested waiting awhile, as though she still felt mystified by the absence of any intelligence from New Zealand. But having heard nothing, she felt she could not be blamed, whatever might be the cause, and whatever information might come now, she had no desire to break the pledge to Harold, who had thoroughly gained her love. Moreover, she had become quite reconciled to her marriage, when she found that both parents, who had discerned Harold's sterling qualities, were anxious that she should take what they believed would be a wise step for her own happiness, and one which would provide for her a home in the village she loved.

The day was fixed and great rejoicings were arranged to celebrate the happy event in Oatlands. The uniting of two prominent families, the marriage of the only daughter of the county member, and the popularity of both bride and bridegroom were sufficient reasons for the villagers to be *en fête* upon such an occasion. There had been presentations of a silver rose bowl from the tenantry, an epergne from the villagers, and a host of decorative articles for the new home, while Harold and Gladys were regarded as the most fortunate couple in

receiving the felicitations of troops of friends. The pretty chapel was adorned with palms, hot house plants and flowers, while at the entrance to Witley Court was erected the floral arch, which had caused a pang to Cyril, with a motto wishing long life to the happy pair. Bunting fluttered from most of the cottage windows, while festoons of evergreens and flowers stretched across the road over which the carriages passed.

When the day arrived, Gladys, fresh and fair as ever, came into the place of worship which she had attended, leaning upon the arm of Mr. Denton, M.P., and was received by her five bridesmaids. It was generally pronounced by competent judges of the fair sex to be the daintiest wedding that Oatlands had ever seen, everything being thought to be in such good taste, while the gowns were quite *à la mode*. The bridegroom looked, as most bridegrooms try to look on this day in their lives, as happy as his new responsibilities permit, and despite his nervousness while searching in the recesses of his pocket for the ring, the important function was satisfactorily performed.

Luckily, Gladys did not know that Cyril Greenwood was in the building, sore at heart, witnessing a ceremonial with mixed feelings. Should he, Cyril asked himself, make his presence known? Once, when the challenge was given for any one to show lawful cause or impediment why the union should not take place, he almost felt tempted, in his agony of mind, to cry out. But what could he say? He could only reproach his own folly and neglect, and so he must for ever hold his peace and bear in cruel silence the ordeal of seeing Gladys given away to another—more worthy of her it may be—but yet not more loved, as he thought. So he sat in the pew, his head half buried in his hands, lest his troubled expression of face should betray his overwrought feelings and some one should recognise the dashing young fellow who used to walk through the village with Gladys. His youthful misdeeds rose up against him and constrained him to quiet-

ness, otherwise he must have protested. It was now too late. The ring had been placed on her finger, the Benediction had been pronounced, and as the strains of the Wedding March came from the organ, the rebellious spirit of Cyril once more broke out. He rose from his seat with a determination that he would see the bride pass out, whatever the consequences might be. Yet he half concealed himself behind the congregation, fearing that Gladys' eyes should meet his and then where would his resolves of concealment be? Glancing at her side face, flushed with happiness, yet bearing some trace of anxiety, he wondered whether he had been altogether forgotten in his absence. How charming she looked—he thought he had never seen her so beautiful before. It was like a dream and oblivious of everybody, he wandered out, hot and feverish, into the cool air, to try to control the excited thoughts of his brain. Unobserved and unrecognised he turned from the happy faces of the villagers, which harmonised so little with his own feelings, and made his way into old haunts in the fields which were well known to him. Here in a deserted spot, he sat on the half-broken stile turning over in his disturbed mind the events that had led up to that trying moment. At last, feeling a chill, he roused himself from his reverie, and curiosity led him now, while the wedding feast was in progress, to gossip with some of the villagers who would not know him. So, professing to be a stranger passing through Oatlands, he managed to learn that Harold and Gladys were very popular in the village, that part of his father's estate had been turned by Mr. Denton into allotments and small holdings, that a village institute had been organised for the labourers and others and that, despite the terrible flood, of which he had not before heard, the fortunes of Oatlands had been in the ascendant. One remark touched him to the very quick. Said one of the women villagers, "We thought Miss Gladys was a bit sweet on Sir William Greenwood's son, Cyril, at one time, Wasn't it strange," she said, "that he never even wrote?"

Miss Gladys pined a bit, but Harold Wright won her over and a real nice wife she'll be for him. He's a lucky fellow, I ween." Cyril hurriedly bid his informant "Good day," as he almost broke down and went away, thinking to himself that if the bridegroom was so lucky, how terribly unlucky he himself must be. And as he left Eastgate by train, still disguised, he saw the bride and bridegroom depart, amid shows of rice and slippers from their friends, on their honeymoon in Switzerland.

Cyril returned to London, feeling very sad and depressed, and when next morning, after a feverish and disturbed night, he tried to get up, he found himself unfit to leave his bed. His heated brain and disordered mind told him that the great strain he had undergone since his arrival in England, had, in his weakened health, once more laid him upon a sick bed. The doctor was summoned to the hotel where he was staying, and ordered his removal to the Hospital in an ambulance. In his delirious moments, he had cried out as though in agony of mind, but no-one could discover what the mental trouble was that had brought him so low. Reserved and uncommunicative, he gave an assumed name, and even the resident surgeon, attentive as he was to his wants and anxious for his recovery, could not prevail upon him to let him communicate with his friends. He could only gather that his life had been a sad one, that he was almost friendless, and that he intended to return to New Zealand as soon as he was better. His recovery was slow, but while he sat in the pleasant and bright wards of the Hospital, he made one resolve, that the past should be, as far as possible, forgotten and blotted out from his memory. To the old settler in the Dominion, who had been so faithful to him, he would return, from thence he would write to Mr. Denton refunding to him the loan, which he had made when he first went out, and at the same time, wish the bride and bridegroom every happiness. But they might never know of his visit to England, nor realise the bitterness of his disappointment.

CHAPTER XXV.

A VILLAGE TRAGEDY.

Quite a character was Grimm, the parish clerk and sexton, whose sentiments respecting the voluntary or non-provided schools have already been given. Of coarse and rubicund countenance, he was almost repulsive in appearance, while his general manner was surly and disobliging to the last degree. Indeed, he was regarded as the village prophet of evil, and he certainly took a pessimistic view of every change that was made. Accustomed to a certain round of duties, of course, accompanied by certain fees, which ought to savour of generosity, he regarded with the keenest disapproval any attempt to disturb those ecclesiastical traditions in which he had been nurtured. He had scraped through life so far with but little education, and what need was there to fuss about the sort of religion taught in these village schools. The boys were a bad lot, in his estimation, especially when they scoffed and "cheeked" him and they wanted "a good hiding" to make them behave better. As to the girls, why the "young hussies," the sooner they were "out at service" the better for everybody. And if the Vicar chose to take all "the young brats" to church on Saints' days or holy days, well, what did it matter. It gave him some trouble to clean the church up, but nobody could prevent it, not even the Managers, for the parson had his own way, and as for chapel folk—well, let 'em mind their own business,

as long as the rates were kept down, and as little spent on the schools as possible.

Such were Grimm's ideas, and although John Welldon sometimes said that the law was being broken and such things ought not to be, Grimm used to say—

"Look 'ere, master John, I'm naa lawyer and know fote about it; if I tell paarson that some o' tha Dessenters groomble, he sez to me, sez he; 'Grimm, you do as I tell yer and let them as doant loike it alone, I'll see to them.' That's how I catch it, my bor."

And John Welldon knew that the domination of the cleric was not to be disputed, and having been ejected from one farm, he did not want to lose another, so perforce he had to swallow his strong convictions of right and justice.

Grimm was most communicative and demonstrative when, beside a bright fire in the parlour of the village inn, he discoursed, with a pint-mug in front of him, upon the general gossip of the village. As he became more excited, owing to his taking more than was good for him, he would launch out into statements of a scandalising character, in which the Vicar's sentiments were not too politely criticised. This condition of affairs reached the Vicar's ears and one day, when he was "in his cups," Grimm was sent for, and conducting himself in an insulting and objectionable manner, received a summary dismissal from a post which he had held for twenty-five years. With insolence and rudeness, he demanded to know the reason of his dismissal, and was told it was for neglect of his work and unsteady habits, which even he himself knew was perfectly true, since he had lately spent much more time and money at the public-house than could be justified. So Grimm was cast upon the world, out of employment, and too far advanced in life, even if he had wished to do so, to seek his fortunes elsewhere. Before giving up his post, he had asked whether any allowance would be made to him in consideration of his past services, but had to be told that there was no such

provision and his conduct did not justify it. So there was nothing for him, half broken-down man that he was, through drink and advancing age, but to endeavour to find somewhere the means of earning his own living. Indeed, it almost seemed to him as if the Workhouse would be the only shelter for himself and his wife. His pride would not allow him to entertain such a disgrace, he would sooner die than end his days there, to beg he was ashamed, and he could not obtain employment.

In this difficulty, he was driven to abandon his old prejudices, to forget all the hard words he had said to those who differed from him, and to seek the aid of Mr. Denton. Grimm told his story, suitably embellished, and pleaded for assistance to prevent his coming to that condition of need which might compel him to go to the Workhouse. Mr. Denton helped him temporarily, until he could find some employment, and sent him to Eastgate, to search for work, perhaps more suitable to him than that to be found in the country. Grimm, however, met with no better success in the town, and tried to forget his troubles by drinking in the public-house, to which he had been wont to resort too often in past days. - Here he found some of his old associates, who could not help noticing his subdued demeanour, so strong a contrast to that garrulousness of self-important officialism which had formerly distinguished his frequent visits. But Grimm cared not to talk now. He was one of the unemployed, thrown on the world, and half stupefied with drink, he wandered into the streets. He was seen reeling about as he tried to make his way home to Oatlands alongside the Canal.

The next morning Grimm was missing. No information of him could be obtained. The police traced him into the public-house, where he had been served, and found that he had afterwards been seen to go homewards. The natural supposition was that he had either fallen or walked into the Canal and a search was accordingly made. With long pronged instruments, known as eel-spears, two men

in boats searched below the water, and after many hours' labour, his body was brought to the surface. The Coroner's jury returned a verdict of accidental drowning, and the remains of the villager, who was once regarded as an authority amongst certain of his class, were laid in a grave in the churchyard where he had officiated at the funerals of so many of his neighbours.

It was a depressing event. Even villages have their shadows and dark days, and Mr. Denton, John Welldon and others, who knew Grimm only too well, could only feel how much in accordance with his pessimistic life and unhappy influence had been his tragic end. None felt more keenly the sad end of the old parish clerk than the Vicar of Oatlands, for he was a man of warm sympathies and tender feelings, despite his views on educational matters, which were the result of ecclesiastical training and a belief in the necessity for religious instruction of a certain kind. Poor John Grimm had long been "a thorn in the flesh" to the Rev. J. Priestly, and, when after many warnings and remonstrances, he was obliged to dismiss him at last, it was in order to avoid the scandal that would otherwise have been caused by his irregular habits. But an almshouse was found for the widow of the old clerk and sexton, who was *sans reproche* in her life, and an allowance made until such time as her age might entitle her to the possibility of a pension.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MR. DENTON RETIRES FROM PARLIAMENT.

Mr. Denton was becoming anxious to be relieved of his Parliamentary duties, but he would not abandon the task to which he had devoted a considerable portion of his life, until a scheme had been matured which would provide an old age pension for those who were really necessitous. Persons, in comfortable circumstances, he argued, needed no pension, and only to the most deserving and necessitous should they be given. His scheme provided that only the aged poor, who lacked the necessities of life and were unable to obtain them, should be eligible, and to a local pension committee, with certain safeguards, could be delegated the task of selecting such cases. In the case of hospital patients, invalid in-door pauper or lunatics, they might be treated as pensionable, and the amount paid over to the institution supporting them. Pensions might be graduated in amount in proportion to the age of the pensioner, ranging from 3s. to 5s. at 65—70, and reaching to 6s. or 7s. until the age of 80 or over, an addition of 60 to 70 per cent. being made for the wife in the case of married couples. But it would be possible to vary the pension between maximum and minimum limits in the discretion of the local pension committee, which would determine the minimum amount necessary for existence and secure that (added to the pensioner's own resources) the pension should bring that

amount up to the necessary level. The Chancellor of the Exchequer had once remarked "You cannot have everything at once and everything together," and small beginnings, even if not doing all that was required, would relieve the dire necessity of aged people who, under present circumstances, are living on the very verge of a cruel starvation. Great responsibility would rest upon the local committee, which would contain representatives of various local bodies, such as the Poor Law Guardians and the County and Town Councils, while officers would have to be employed in investigating applications and determining the accuracy of the representations made. The pension list would be submitted to the approval of the Local Government Board Inspector of the district, who would decide upon the reasonableness and accuracy of such list, or make investigation of an independent character. Without his approval, the Government subvention of one-half or more of the cost of the pensions would not be payable and there would be a uniform system secured throughout the country. The pensions would be paid through the Post Office similarly to those of the Army and Navy at present, and granted for a limited time, so that periodically they would come up for revision. If the State provided one-half of the cost, the county or union would also find a moiety. The Government auditors would check the pension accounts and forward abstracts to the central pension authority, which would pay the local authorities, on the basis of the auditors figures and recommendations. In the case of persons who expended the money on drink or in an extravagant and reckless manner, they would be placed either under the Probation Officers or Poor Law Guardians, or brought up before the Justices for punishment.

Such was the scheme that Mr. Denton had worked out in his mind, and although he fully realised that with any such plan there must be some jealousies, because the hopes that would be raised could not all be realised at once, yet an appreciable portion of the most necessitous

cases would be dealt with under these conditions. Time would show in what way it could be usefully extended and whether the thrift, in early life, of the poor who earned wages, could be in addition encouraged and supplemented.

The Small Holdings and Allotments remedy, he foresaw also, would have its disappointments and difficulties. The enormous quantity of land applied for, out of all proportion to the amount procurable at a reasonable cost, which was sufficiently near at hand, indicated that a very careful selection would have to be made of those who were likely to be suitable tenants and whose knowledge of the management of land would enable them to obtain a sufficient return for the labour expended upon their holdings. Hundreds of applicants were inclined to specify their desire for the best pieces of land in the villages, without consideration of price or sentimental considerations, and it was obvious that such demands would be impossible of admission, so that disappointment would follow. While some might make a fair living out of a small holding by thrift and good management, many would be quite unfitted for the responsibility and by the time these were weeded out, the land would have deteriorated in value under their incapable management. On the other hand there would be a fair proportion who would prove themselves by their industry and capacity, equal to the efficient management of a reasonable amount of land.

In season and out of season, at likely times and unlikely times, Mr. Denton sought to give the results of his experience and observation of country life to those in power who could assist in bringing to fruition, legislation that would help the people whom he sought to benefit. After much patient and earnest work he succeeded at last in obtaining the placing upon the Statute Book, Acts which, if not altogether what he desired, yet embodied these principles in the main, and were sufficiently elastic to allow of adaptation to the needs of town and rural life.

Having accomplished this, he felt his work in Parliament was done, and he desired to be relieved of the fatigues of late sittings, the exhaustion produced by the watching of long debates, and to experience a peaceful old age among his own people. To his constituents, he could urge, that having now redeemed his promise to offer inducements to those who flooded the towns as unemployed dockers, waterside men or in various other capacities, to return to their country life, he now desired to see the effects of the working of his schemes in his own neighbouring villages.

So Mr. Denton intimated his acceptance of the Chiltern Hundreds, and his seat in Parliament was declared vacant.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOW OATLANDS BECAME A MODEL VILLAGE.

Ten years have slipped away and Oatlands has seen many and important changes during that decade. John and Mary Woodhouse have come into their old-age pension, for the persistent efforts of Mr. Denton in pressing the subject upon the attention of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, resulted in a plan being propounded which developed gradually into a—still somewhat experimental, but yet on a sound basis—workable scheme. Sixty-five instead of seventy was the age at which a pension was obtainable, exceptions being only made where illness or incapacity to work could be considered a reason for a special grant at an earlier time of life. The pension to those who reached sixty-five was fixed at 5s. per week, aliens and criminals being excluded and persons possessing more than £26 per year made ineligible. Past and present paupers were not excluded, while to meet the case of aged folk, encouragement had been given to private benefactors to provide cottage homes and almshouses with small gardens, where the evening of life might be spent in peace and contentment. Those likely to use their pension improvidently received them in kind. The cost of the whole scheme represented a sum of less than twenty millions of money or about 2½d. to 3d. in the £ of the income of the nation. About a third of the amount was represented by the Poor Law expenditure under the old

system. Of the remainder one half was borne by the County Councils in proportion to ratable value, and the nation found the other seven millions by a graduated income tax and an adjustment of national burdens such as reasonable and proper economies on military and naval expenditure, brought about by the existence of International Arbitration Courts and the avoidance of the necessity of maintaining expensive and ever-increasing armaments. In addition to this, there was also a State scheme for providing annuities on easy terms, for those who put aside a small sum per week of their earnings during an agreed period of life, when they felt best able to afford it, while the Friendly Societies, at a given age, in consideration of an infinitely small contribution of three farthings or a penny additional to their periodical payments, substituted an old age pension for the ordinary sick allowance, although the right to medical attendance was retained. John and Mary Woodhouse had a joint allowance which took away all anxiety, and moreover, their cottage having been acquired as a home for aged couples, they were allowed to retain it for their lives. In addition, John had his allotment which he was able to partly cultivate himself, Giles spending many an hour upon it to assist his parents to do the heavier work, while Rose sometimes, when she could spare time, gave a helping hand. So that, after all, Mary's unwavering faith in an All-wise and loving Father in Heaven had been rewarded. Even the rural postman, who was debarred by his sentence to a term of imprisonment from receiving a pension, either from the Post Office or from the State pension fund, was permitted to occupy an allotment, and by quiet and honest toil—the outcome of a bitter lesson—was able to increase his holding to one of several acres, and to maintain his wife and family.

Giles Day, by working for Farmer Langley, and employing his off-days and leisure hours on his allotment, soon found himself able to extend his holding. The State had granted extended powers to the County Councils, by

which land could be leased by agreement. Giles was one of the applicants for a small holding of ten acres. The land upon which he had been working for Farmer Langley was in the market, through the retirement of his master from farming, and Mr. Harold Wright was found to have been the purchaser, to the disappointment of some who feared that the Extonshire County Council had lost the chance of acquiring it. However, it soon transpired that Mr. Wright, who was a member of the Council, was not purchasing for himself, but that the County Council had entrusted him with the responsibility of obtaining it for them at a fair market price. So Giles and others got their small holdings at a rent, which with an addition that would pay off the principal as well, would enable him, in due time to acquire the freehold, which he could leave to his wife and family so that they would probably never need an old age pension. Of course, Giles and Rose had to be careful and industrious, if they meant to pay their way, but as their family of boys and girls grew up, they also found healthy occupation in looking after the fruit and vegetables on the land instead of spending their time in idleness or gossip. Oatlands now had only one public-house, the others having been closed and the owners compensated, because more than one, in the opinion of the Justices of the Division and indeed, of the villagers, was not required. This house, however, was retained for the use of travellers and others who required refreshment or accommodation, but it was a free house, and not tied to any company or brewery, whilst no profit was allowed to be taken on intoxicating liquor, which was only sold with limitations that prevented excess. In consequence, the population of this progressive village was sober, industrious and prosperous, while its church and places of worship were filled with worshippers in greater numbers than had ever before been known.

Though Oatlands had within its borders men of various minds, and many opinions, time had wrought a great change in one respect. The folly of attempting to force

or persuade people to certain views had become evident, and in the place of dismissing schoolmasters and teachers who exercised their liberty of conscience, a much greater tolerance prevailed. No formulary or creed was taught in the school, and whilst the Bible was read, or a hymn sung, followed by the Lord's Prayer, in which none were compelled to take part, there was no denominational teaching of any kind in the State schools as they were now called. An education fitting the children to honourably fulfil whatever calling they might follow and to instil high moral principles, as well as sound knowledge, was the aim of the popularly elected managers, one of whom was the parent of children attending the schools. Churchmen and Nonconformists vied with each other in securing efficiency, and it was their boast that one of the boys had, step by step, obtained a University degree and had been appointed a Principal of a large undenominational and State Training College for Teachers, by means of the education ladder, enabling him to climb from elementary to secondary, secondary to higher grade, and training college to University, which the Minister of Education had been able, with the aid of Parliament, to construct.

Mr. Harold Wright had been, for some time, the President of the Club-house where the villagers spent their spare evenings. Here there was a well-supplied reading-room, a social room, where smoking was permitted, a library, and a room where public entertainments could be held. There was also a savings bank, coal club, provision club, and educational and recreative organisations, with their separate funds, whilst the Friendly Society lodge also made the club-house its headquarters. Mr. William Denton had been a great benefactor in obtaining these advantages, and when he opened it some years before, he had pointed out those developments which could be centralised under its roof. Politics and religious differences, however, found no entrance there, and, indeed, there was so much to employ the better qualities of men, and no stimulants to excite the brain or make

them quarrelsome, that harmony was not only found to prevail, but a comradeship and *esprit de corps* was established among its members which made Oatlands regarded as a model village, whose affairs very seldom needed regulation by the Eastgate Police-court.

To all these progressive movements, Harold and Gladys were able to give encouragement, as well as assistance, and particularly as it was found that the general tone and intelligence of the villagers were raised by the advantages, which had only been obtained by considerable perseverance and effort. The young men of the neighbourhood were contented and did not show that disposition to seek their fortunes in the larger centres of population. The fruit industry had developed, agriculture was improving, and the opportunities for thrift and careful living, made them feel that with a nest-egg in the Savings Bank, and the insurance in case of sickness which the benefits of the Friendly Societies give, that there was not the hopeless outlook that made John Woodhouse once feel so downcast and depressed. New cottages and homesteads had sprung into existence on the country-side, while the well-cultured village gardens, allotments and small holdings gave an air of prosperity seldom seen.

Mr. William Denton, grown grey in the service of his country, had the satisfaction of seeing springing up around Witley Court, a flourishing community who had benefitted by the legislation he had endeavoured, in his humble and unobtrusive way, to advance. Few realised how constant and real had been his interest in the provision of Small Holdings or in the realization of Old Age Pensions, though more than one member of the Government had been only too glad to avail themselves of his sound judgment. Upon the advice of the Premier, the King had conferred upon him a Baronetcy, a reward which was, by no means, a party one, for his services had been rendered to the State rather than to a party, and everyone felt that he was a patriot who had honestly sought the general weal of his country.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CYRIL GREENWOOD BRINGS HOME A
COLONIAL WIFE.

Mr. Harold Wright had been elected M.P. for Extonshire in the place of Sir Wm. Denton, Bart., who like Cincinnatus, the Roman Consul, himself went "back to the land," after having so long taken part in Imperial affairs. Sir William, feeling that the activities of life were over for him, now retired from the banking firm in order to pass the remainder of a useful life amongst those whose gratitude he had earned by placing them beyond the reach of carking care in their old age, and providing the younger branches with the chance of bringing up their families.

The fortunes of Cyril Greenwood, too, had changed for the better. When he returned to the homestead of the British settler who had been so considerate and kind during his first illness, he found a cordial welcome awaiting him. His relapse in England had pulled him down very much, but the voyage had done something towards recuperation, and after a few days' rest on land, he once more began to yearn for a more active life. A farm was secured on favourable terms, and early and late, with the advice and encouragement of the settler, he threw his energies into its development, with so much success, that he found in his toil a pleasant stimulus that he had never before experienced. At last he had begun to reap

the reward of his labours, and his health had become more vigorous and capable of resisting fatigue. The niece of the settler's wife coming to stay in the locality, an attachment grew up between them, and the bitterness of the past having been almost obliterated by the effluxion of time, he found much happiness in the society of the fair and intelligent Colonist, who had thus broken the spell of his loneliness. To the offer which he made to share his home and busy life she gave an affirmative answer, and they were married in the far-off land, with the simplest of ceremonies, but the heartiest good wishes of their friends. At the same time, he learned that his financial affairs were becoming more prosperous, and his wife's dowry had still further helped to realise that competency which he longed to be in possession of, so that he might one day, return to the dear old village of Oatlands, which he had always regarded as "home." He found an opportunity of realising his farm to advantage, and having obtained the consent of his wife to agree to settle in England, he disposed of his estate, now productive and yielding a good return for its cultivation. Once again he set sail for England, this time accompanied by his wife, and with the knowledge that his means would be sufficient to enable them to settle comfortably in the old country. For although New Zealand had proved to him, as John Woodhouse had put it, a Land of Promise, which forecast had been fulfilled, he yet yearned for the country, the value and comforts of which he had never fully realised, until he was called upon to face the hard toil of a colonial emigrant who has to do pioneer work.

Muriel's introduction to the strange sights of England, when she landed, was a revelation to a Colonist, who had seen but little of city life. Having remained for some time in London, and ascertained the position of his affairs in this country more fully, they came to the decision to occupy the ancestral home at Oatlands, and Eagle Hall, with its diminished area of land, was to again restore the family name to that village. Quietly

they arrived at Eastgate, and took up their residence at Oatlands, where the possibility of their return had already preceded them.

Cyril's first meeting with Gladys took place immediately after the return of her husband to Parliament for Extonshire. Chancing three days after his arrival to see her near the Club-house, a somewhat forced and yet cordial greeting took place between them, as he pleasantly said:

"I am pleased to meet you, Mrs. Wright, after so many years, and to congratulate you and your husband on his obtaining the distinction of a seat in Parliament—an honour which has been well deserved."

Gladys's thoughts rushed back many years as she saw how much older and more careworn Cyril Greenwood looked since he walked by her side, and she blushing replied, "Indeed, Mr. Greenwood, I have heard so little of you during the years you have been gone, that it has quite startled me to see you here again. When did you arrive?"

"Only a day or two ago," Mr. Greenwood replied, "but already I can see a great change in Oatlands. It is almost a Paradise, so cheerful and prosperous does it look. How is it to be accounted for?"

Gladys explained to him the effect of the provision of a village club, the extension of allotments and small holdings, the expansion of educational liberty and more harmonious relations, the establishment of Old Age Pensions which had inspired fresh hopes and energies into the usual apathetic villagers. Several had come "back to the land," others ~~would~~ would have been tempted away, had found scope for their energies at home, and in fact, the problem of the depopulation of the village had been largely solved by these economic changes.

"And I have come back to the land too!" said Mr. Greenwood, "and knowing the value of old age pensions in New Zealand, I am indeed pleased to find that this country has recognised the claim of the toiler to some-

thing better than a bare pittance outside or an order for a Workhouse home. I have known something of a luxurious and gay life, as you know, and also of one of privation, so that whilst ready to say "Give me neither poverty nor riches," it is certainly the duty of our administrators to see that the honest toiler, who contributes to the wealth of the country, but cannot spare any for the provision of old age, should be placed beyond the reach of want and suffering in the evening of life. I was foolish, as a young man, Mrs. Wright, in wasting my chances, but I have learned in the Colonies, to value an English home, and have consequently come back to the country where my kith and kin dwelt.

Harold, at this moment, came up and received Mr. Greenwood's personal congratulations on his election to Parliament, as well as the complimentary remark:

"I am sure you will be a worthy representative, and one who will follow in the steps of Sir William Denton, whom everybody esteems, poor as well as rich."

"I am afraid I am unworthy to follow Sir William," said Harold, but will you not come and see him; he would welcome you with pleasure to Oatlands once more."

"No, not now," said Mr. Greenwood, "but I will bring my wife to see him, if I may, and I trust we shall all be good friends in this pleasant village."

"Then you are remaining here," said Harold, "and not returning to New Zealand?"

"Fortune has so far favoured me that I have been able to take my father's house, and am content to make this my home. I hope to introduce my wife to some of my old friends."

"I am sure the village will welcome you back most heartily and also cordially receive your wife. You must give us some of your experiences of Colonial life some evening to our members at the Club-house, though they seem quite content to remain at home now."

Cyril Greenwood returned to Eagle Hall, where the workmen had been busy preparing the old home for the

new-comers, but were hardly finished by the time that they arrived. The house, no longer empty and deserted, soon began to assume a brighter appearance, and the gardens instead of being overgrown with weeds, showed brilliant patches of colour that gave evidence of cultivation and care. The villagers remarked upon the change and wondered that it had so soon recovered from its long neglect.

Cyril Greenwood took his wife to see Sir William Denton, now quietly enjoying the rest and retirement which advancing years demand, and Harold and Gladys joined them while they were having tea on the lawn and talking of old times. Speaking of his difficulties after landing in New Zealand and the long illness which severely handicapped his start, Gladys quietly said—

We wondered why you did not write to my father to say how you were getting on in your new home.

As a matter of fact I did write, replied Mr. Greenwood, but left the letter in my desk, and was seized with illness before I could post it. I found it there some time afterwards, when it was too late to send it, but having business in England came back to Oatlands and was present at your wedding.

Gladys' face blanched when she learned, for the first time, that Cyril was in Oatlands when she was married, but she recovered herself sufficient to exclaim—

Why ever did you not come to Witley Court, and make yourself known to all of us?

It was Cyril's turn to show embarrassment at this pointed question, and changing colour, he rejoined somewhat guiltily—

No, Mrs. Wright, I had not the "wedding garment" on, and though I silently wished you happiness, my Colonial outfit would have caused astonishment rather than pleasure to your father and his guests.

But, said Gladys, you did not even let us know you were in England.

No, said Cyril, I left Oatlands without even being

recognised, and after a somewhat severe illness, caused by a chill, I was obliged to return to New Zealand to look after my farm as soon as I was well enough. Now I come to ask forgiveness for my neglect, which has caused me not a little unhappiness.

Gladys thought she read between the lines of his story the whole reason of her suspense and waiting, and the distress he must have suffered when he came to England to find that his silence led her to accept Harold's offer of marriage.

Gladys simply replied: I am sure I shall like your wife very much, and we shall be friends, I hope, so that she will feel at home with us.

Muriel, Cyril's wife advanced to her husband as these words were spoken, while Gladys admired her tall, commanding figure, and a face of wonderful interest and brightness. Muriel smiled as she replied: And I hope, too, we shall be friends, for my husband always had a good word for his Oatlands acquaintances.

When Gladys returned home and thought of Cyril Greenwood's conversation, she felt a natural sympathy for him in his experiences. But, in her own heart, she knew that she had chosen right, and that though Cyril was her first love, she had been led to link her life with Harold, whose worth and unselfishness she had learned to appreciate. Cyril, too, had found a wife worthy of his affection, so that "all things had worked together for good" despite the difficulties of life's journey, to those who like Mary Woodhouse, had trusted in the wisdom of an over-ruling Providence.

And what had become of George, the eighteen-year-old son of Mr. Denton, who, in a previous chapter, was studying for his college examination. Not succeeding in passing, his thoughts turned to Australia, where he desired to enter upon sheep-farming, in conjunction with a relative. But although his father had sent him out and given him a good start, he had not shown the stability and "grit" of his parent, and had proved a continual

source of expense to him. The time was coming now, however, when he was beginning to profit by the experiences of his youth and he had settled to the life of a Colonial sheep farmer, fairly well to do, when droughts did not inflict heavy losses upon his flocks. But he had found, like many others, that a Colonial life meant hard toil and rough experiences, which possibly he might have been spared, if he had shown the same inclination to throw his energies into life at home.

In due time, Cyril did his share in helping forward the prosperity of Oatlands, and bringing back to the free and open country some of the population of a manufacturing town. For besides Mr. Wright's fruit preserving factory, Cyril Greenwood removed the factory, in which he was still interested, to the country and chose Oatlands for its site. Here a large building was erected, the adjacent railway and canal affording convenient transmission of its output to the markets, and its workpeople having the advantages of comfortable cottages with gardens and healthy surroundings. So that Oatlands, instead of becoming a depopulated village, with its land depreciating in value, gradually developed into a centre of industry and agricultural prosperity, which helped to serve as an example of what might be done towards tempting back to the country some of those who live in the slums and crowded streets of our populous cities.

* * * * *

It was harvest time, and as Cyril looked over the level plain, he saw an expanse of yellow corn, waving in the summer breeze, like a "Field of Cloth of Gold." The orchards were laden with golden fruit, the fertile soil being hidden in the blaze of gold and green which made so fair a prospect. The sky with its sweep of clouds and expansive horizon, produced that far reaching effect of infinite height and distance, of which a level plain in the Fenland alone has the secret. It was a stretch of landscape that had a striking beauty of its own, not flat and

devoid of interest, as some might describe it, but a veritable "Land of Goshen," or at least, rich in those products of the earth which provide for the sustenance and nourishment of man. Cyril felt glad that once again he had returned to that Homeland—that spot of which he had so often thought when, far away, on the other side of the world, and the couplet would sometimes pass through his mind as he longed to return to the land where he had neglected his opportunities—

Home, sweet Home,
There's no place like Home!

But Muriel's thoughts were often far away in New Zealand. Yet she also called England her home, and desired to see those around her, struggling with poverty, enjoying some of the advantages which she knew the Colonists and immigrants at the Antipodes were able to obtain. She had heard, too often, the shadow of old age falling upon the toiling classes of England, blotting out the sunshine of hope and self-reliance, darkening even middle age, and sometimes embittering the relations between parents and children. This shadow was, indeed, beginning to be removed, and some of the oldest and most decrepit had the happy knowledge that a serene and secure period of rest, free from the possibilities of the termination of life in dire poverty, had by beneficent legislation been secured to them. And this she felt was the dawn of brighter and better days in the Mother Country.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A PEEP INTO THE FUTURE.

A final word to our readers. They will probably have gathered that the object of this simple story of village life is to demonstrate that in our country districts, as well as in the towns, there are those honest and industrious toilers, whose life is darkened by the insecurity of even the barest means of existence, when old age comes upon them. This ought not so to be. While a great deal that is impracticable and visionary has been written about universal and unconditional old-age pensions, such proposals being almost impossible of adoption, for years to come, because of their financial demands, yet the more prosaic but practicable idea of a limited or even conditional scheme would have a far greater chance of adoption and with much less delay. The possibility of a contributory scheme, such as is adopted in Germany, is deserving of consideration and even experimental treat. It might be that a contribution would be required only where a sufficient wage was earned, or that, within certain limits, a contribution should entitle the individual to a proportionately increased pension, so that his thrift would be rewarded by additional comforts in old age. Those who had brought up large families or been handicapped by sickness, would be awarded a pension suitable to their needs, even if they had not been able to contribute anything. At any rate, if a contributory scheme were

devised, it would be easier to recede from it, if it were not found to be practicable, than to organise one, after unconditional pensions had been tried.

But it must not be forgotten that those people who have toiled and led decent lives, who have never, indeed, had any chance of saving or had anything to save, are the very people whose lot ought to be bettered, and whose burden ought to be less heavy. To such, old age pensions would never be grudged by any one. There is the almost unconquerable antipathy to go to the Workhouse to end their days and some other refuge must be provided. In many towns, the bequests of generous benefactors have provided such refuges in the shape of almshouses, which are scarcely ever empty, but are much sought after by persons needing a shelter in their latter years. For the undeserving and reckless, the workhouse may still be needed, while the sick and absolutely helpless will be provided for in infirmaries or like institutions. In an article in the *Contemporary Review* on "Old Age Pensions and the Belongingless Poor," by Miss Edith Sellers, it is pointed out that to this class something more than a pension is needed. That lady writes:—

"In the workhouses I visited from first to last while on census-making bent, there were, roughly speaking, 2,000 inmates above sixty-five. Quite a thousand of them, however, belonged to the very infirm class, the class that required trained nursing and must therefore, of necessity be in institutions of one sort or another. A good 400 more were so feeble in body or mind as to require more care than even a devoted daughter could possibly bestow, if she had children to attend to, or work to do outside her own home. Among the whole 2,200 there were, so far as I could judge, only about 800, at most, who did not require more care, if they were to be properly cared for, than the chances are they would receive, were they to quit the workhouse and go to live in the cottages or tenements of their relations."

The writer proceeds to argue that great injustice will

certainly be done to the very section of the poor whom we are all most anxious to help, if, when old-age pensions are granted, old age homes are not provided for the pensioners who are alone in the world and respectable. Their homes would not need to be many nor yet large. As for the cost of living that would be lower in old-age homes than in latter day workhouses. "One doesn't need much food, you see, when one's old," as one woman said, but what one does need is a home to which no disgrace is attached, a home where the door is barred against the vicious, degraded, and criminal, where one is kindly treated and left to go one's way in peace. In such a home, the writer believes every inmate might be well housed, fed and clothed for 9s. per week per head. In London workhouses, the cost is said to be 14s. per head, but in old age homes, much greater economy could be practised.

It has been sometimes urged that while pensions have been and are given by the State to those who certainly have no real need for them, those who toil the hardest and suffer the most from unavoidable privation and want have not received that consideration which their contribution to the wealth of the country deserves. Further, it may even be argued that Socialist doctrines, in their extremest form, have been fostered by men, whose life having been soured and embittered by misfortune, have despaired of obtaining, within the range of their active life, an allotment, small holding or other incentive to thrift and provision for old age, or even when, unfit by decrepitude to work, an allowance untainted by the reproach attaching to Poor Law relief. No wonder that such a man looks somewhat grudgingly upon the adding of acre to acre by the capitalist, when he himself is unable to obtain even a modest plot or patch upon which to spend his leisure hours. The great number of applicants for land under the Small Holdings Act is sufficient evidence of this hunger for land, and although many of those applying may have to be disappointed, partly owing to the difficulty of obtaining suitable land, or because of

their own unsuitability to work it profitably or remuneratively, doubtless, there will be many who can turn them to profitable account. Not the least difficult problem is to find men with sufficient capital to work the land, so that if adverse seasons come, they may not be involved in embarrassment, and the land get into bad fettle. These are difficulties that experience may overcome and patience will be needed in working out these schemes, so that abnormal losses may not be incurred which will throw a heavy burden on the ratepayers or the State, who may share any deficiency if the loss be unavoidable.

But what chance has a man on a small wage, with a family to feed and bring up, to save, unless some opportunities of this kind come in his way. Doubtless, there are many who neglect such opportunities as they have, and among the most fruitful causes are the intemperance and gambling propensities that so often end in poverty. In an article in the *Nineteenth Century* on "Can the Working Classes Save?" by Mr. J. G. Hutchinson, the writer says:

"One aspect of the question is the mania for betting, not only on horse racing, but on every conceivable manner of sport which can be made to have a winning and a losing side. The passion for trying to win money which they have not worked for, has infected all classes of society, from the highest to the lowest, and none has fallen more effectually under its ban than the working classes, for when they do win, which is not often, the money that has come easily, is made to go easily in drink and questionable pleasures which sap their morality and leave them far worse off in the end. And we have in the strict limitations of these two questions, drink and gambling, the readiest solution of the problem we are discussing. For were there but a tithe of the £110,000,000 per year which is said to be the workmen's share in the annual drink bill saved and used in the provision of more food or more adequate clothing, and better housing, it would, at one stroke, solve not only the question of work and wages for the masses, but also that of their physical and moral de-

terioration. And this reform the working classes can accomplish if they will. The remedy for the surplus labour for which work cannot be found, which is nearest at hand, is to go back to the land, but as this cannot be made to pay under existing conditions, the most hopeful prospect is the acquisition of small holdings by those already on the land, thus stemming the tide of migration to the towns. The only remedies which will prove satisfactory are such as will enable the toiling masses to help themselves. . . . I adjure fellow workers to accept the advice here given in the spirit in which it is offered, as I am convinced we have as a body the power, if we have the will, to save and to improve our position, not by any skimping in either food, raiment or housing, but by being as we are enjoined to be "Temperate in all things." I ask my compatriots to make this effort for the good of the land we love so well—not from purely selfish motives, but in the spirit of the well-known lines of Burns:—

"Not for the sake of getting gear, nor for a train attendant,

But for the glorious privilege of being independent."

There is another side of the question to be considered. Probably the employers of labour will argue that the provision of land for agricultural labourers and others will make them indifferent to their masters' interests and in some cases even more idle, thriftless, and careless as to their future—especially if they can calculate upon a pension in their old age. There may be some such instances, but in those countries where pensions have been provided, it has been found to have increased thrift and to have given men more of hope and less of despair in pursuing their daily calling. Those who are palpably lazy and reckless would be then treated according to their deserts. As to the Small Holdings Act, whilst the land in the Fens is, as a rule, highly productive, and suitable for profitable cultivation, in the southern and other counties it is probably less likely to be remunerative and encouraging to

the small cultivator. Anywhere, the cultivation of a small holding may mean a continuous round of hard toil, every working day of the year from dawn until dusk, and the need of some capital with which to work it, which a bad season may sweep out of existence. There are something like 10,000 applicants for 150,000 acres of land, up to the present, and whilst it is mainly intended to help agricultural labourers and landless rural dwellers to obtain a stake in the country, yet a number of clerks, shop assistants, porters and casual workers are applying for land. One daily newspaper has let a small holding as an experiment to a clerk who, however, has some knowledge of the methods of cultivating land. But many of these applicants would probably have not the remotest idea of the management of land and what is entailed, and there would be the almost certain result of losing any capital that had to be put upon it, beside leaving it in a deplorable condition for the next comer. Hence it is obvious that careful discrimination will be needed in putting men on the land which may be obtainable, who will make the best of it and have sufficient resources to be able to keep it in good heart. Such a selection will probably involve not a little disappointment to the applicants, comprising "all sorts and conditions of men," who imagine that farming can be undertaken without previous knowledge or experience. These suggestions must not be taken as discouraging the unemployed, but rather as preventing a disastrous adaption of a measure that should be of benefit, if judiciously applied.

Very forcible are the words of Mr. R. P. Hookham, of Islip, Oxfordshire, who gave the impulse to Mr. Chas. Booth which led him to take up the movement, so far back as 1879, in a pamphlet which he then wrote. Mr. Hookham says:—

"There is no doubt that three-fourths of the prevailing distress pauperism and crime are more the result of the drinking habits of the working classes, which are mainly to be traced to the hopeless condition of the labourer.

Give him hope and you have struck at the root of his worst vice. Is it not chiefly the desire of securing comforts in the decline of life that stimulates the middle classes to the practice of drunken habits? So let a poor man feel that every sovereign he can put into the savings bank will go to supplement the pension to which he may become entitled and he would not, as now, regard it as so much saved to the poor rate. Only let him feel that what he can spare from immediate wants will certainly add to his comforts in old age, and you apply the strongest incentive to thrift and provident habits."

It has been said that the people who live the longest, and probably the freest from care and trouble, are those who have an annuity, that comes in with unvarying regularity, and one result of the granting of old age pensions undoubtedly would be that the poor would live longer. But instead of a life of suffering and privation, would it not be one of peace and contentment? Two millions have already been ear-marked for these pensions and another three millions added would enable a beginning to be made which could, as funds accrue, be extended in the direction that seems the most practicable and desirable. It should be remembered that in Australia, in Germany, and in Denmark testimony is borne to the fact that thrift, instead of vanishing before these pensions, has actually increased since they have been adopted. If this story, representing some village aspirations and desires, should help in the direction of their ultimate realization, it will have accomplished a good purpose. With a "patch of land and a pension" would there not be many despondent toilers who would look forward to advancing years with that equanimity and contentment which would enable them to say with Browning:—

"The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, 'A whole I planned,'
Youth shows but half: Trust God; see all nor be afraid!"



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